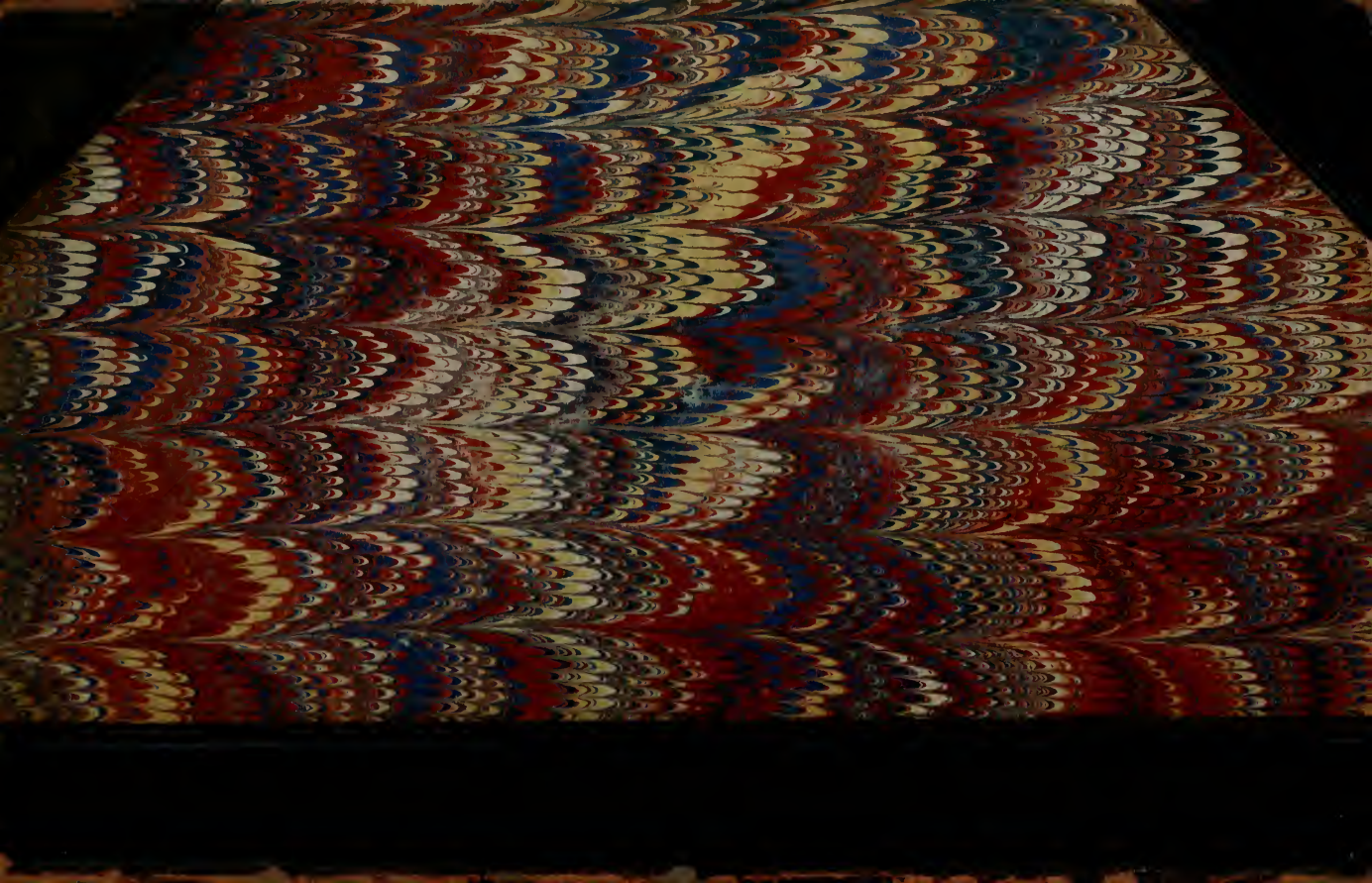

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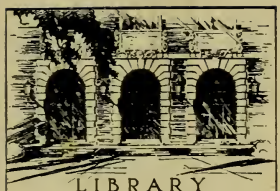

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Lady Holland
With the Author's respects

# CHANTILLY.

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" Dans sa pompe élégante, admirez Chantilli,
De héros en héros, d'age en age embelli."

DELILLE.

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IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:
EDWARD BULL, HOLLES STREET.
1832.

London: Printed by Samuel Bentley, Dorset Street, Fleet Street.

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TO

HER ROYAL HIGHNESS

THE PRINCESS

LOUISE-MARIE-THERESE-CHARLOTTE-ISABELLE

D'ORLEANS,

THESE VOLUMES ARE (BY PERMISSION)

MOST RESPECTFULLY DEDICATED,

BY

HER ROYAL HIGHNESS'S

VERY OBEDIENT AND DEVOTED SERVANT,

GEORGINA ALICIA L——.

London, February 1832.

Hail, old Patrician trees, so great and good!
Hail, ye Plebeian under-wood!
Where the poetic birds rejoice,
And for their quiet nests and plenteous food
Pay with a grateful voice.

SYLVAN WANDERER.

D'ESPIGNAC.

# D'ESPIGNAC.

## CHAPTER I.

"Sa gloire avait passé comme une ombre légère."
VOLTAIRE.

IT has often been observed, and perhaps with justice, that the human heart becomes hardened by a long course of prosperity, and that there are men whose dispositions were mild and generous while in obscurity, who become suddenly harsh and cruel when raised to distinction and power. Such a man was Henri de Valois. As Duke d'Anjou he was adored by the French nation, to whom the victories of

Jarnac and Moncontour had early endeared his name. His renown for valour and moderation quickly spread throughout Europe, and induced the Poles, upon the death of Sigismund Augustus, to choose him for their king. Here too, during the short time he occupied the throne, his prudence and love of justice rendered him the idol of the people; but, unable to resist the stirrings of ambition, upon the death of his brother, Charles the Ninth, he quitted the country over which he had presided in peace and happiness, in order to enter upon the more difficult task of wielding the sceptre of France; a country torn by political factions and civil discord, which raged with violence, in a sanguinary war between Catholics and Huguenots. No sooner, however, was his brow encircled by a diadem which extended his influence and augmented his power, than a change was at once wrought in the heart and mind of the youthful monarch. The amiable and gallant Duke d'Anjou degenerated

into the mere indolent chief of a crowded and dissolute court: the humane and generous King of Poland became a cruel and capricious tyrant, whose arbitrary measures soon raised up enemies even among his own subjects. It was then that distrust and suspicion supervened, which were ultimately followed by the blackest acts of injustice, in banishing or incarcerating all whose views and opinions were obnoxious to his interests.

The death of the Duke de Guise, his detested and formidable rival, murdered by his command at Blois, instead of strengthening his own party, as he had expected, only served to exasperate the people, and heighten the guilty terrors of the monarch. Of the most devoted partisans of De Guise within his power, some were secretly removed, by *lettres de cachet*, to the Bastille, others were banished, and some sought a voluntary exile; and yet, as though *La guerre des trois Henris* was not destined to end even with the death of their distin-

guished leader, the adherents of De Guise became more powerful than ever.

But soon all, save the mere name of sovereign, was wrested from the young king. Vanquished and denounced by the insulted nation, he was compelled, in order to keep up even the least shadow of greatness, to take refuge in one or other of the few country palaces that were left him, where, surrounded by his dissolute court, consisting of those whose ambition led them to hope for high recompense when the storm should subside, or of others, weak and trifling as himself, who cared for nothing but present amusement, he resigned himself to that habitual indolence which soon banishes from the mind its noblest energies, while discord and rapine laid waste his fair and fruitful kingdom. The bravest warriors and proudest nobles had fallen victims to the cabals of party, or had been sacrificed to the gloomy suspicions of the sovereign while in the plenitude of his power.

Among the latter was the brave Count d'Espignac, one of the personal friends and most zealous partisans of De Guise. Doubly formidable, by his disinterested love for the house of Lorraine, and his never-wearying vigilance in its cause, De Valois had long felt that no plot against the former could succeed while D'Espignac was reckoned among the Ligueur chieftains. No sooner was this discovered, than it was deemed expedient to announce that he stood arraigned of treason; and shortly after no one was surprised to learn that the whole of his estates were confiscated, and that he had died, leaving to his only son the charge of his revenge.

Thus it was that the beautiful chateau of Avilly, the ancient patrimony of that noble family, had long remained uninhabited, exhibiting a picture of complete desolation, as if in sympathy with the sorrows of its owner. Its spacious forecourts and magnificent avenues were fast yielding to the rank luxuriance of

briar and bramble; the beautiful gardens, which had long been the boast of Avilly, were overrun with weeds, and presented a most deplorable aspect; and the traveller, who had often before paused in admiration, now turned aside in sorrow, as he remembered its former splendour, and thought on the unhappy fate of its once envied possessor. The inhabitants of Avilly venerated the name of D'Espignac: from time immemorial the manor had been the property of his house. They had been taught to look upon him, not as a harsh unfeeling oppressor, but as a kind friend and generous benefactor, and, contrasting his conduct towards them with that of other great seigneurs towards their dependents, hereditary love and veneration for the family soon quickened into the most devoted personal attachment. His name was never pronounced save with a blessing, and that his son might one day resemble him was the earnest prayer of these faithful and unsophisticated foresters.

It cannot, then, be matter of astonishment that the news of the downfall of so kind a master should be received with the most heart-felt grief by his tenants. They sorrowed for the father,—they trembled for the son,—and their worst fears were soon realised; for, but a short time elapsed, ere they learned, with bitter regret, that the young man himself was become an object of the tyrant's persecution. A reward was offered for his apprehension; and for many weeks were the peace and quiet of Avilly invaded by the numerous emissaries of the King, who lingered about the spot, in hopes that a knowledge of its deepest shades might lead the object of their pursuit to make it his place of refuge. But in this they were disappointed; and after in vain traversing the forest in every direction, they withdrew to renew their search elsewhere, to the no small delight of the inhabitants of Avilly. And yet these simple villagers had but little knowledge of the young Count, for, owing to the troubled

state of the kingdom, he had left his home, long before the usual period, to fight by his father's side, and being subsequently appointed first page of honour, and afterwards Captain of the body-guard, to the Duke de Guise, they had for many years enjoyed but few opportunities of beholding him. They remembered the gallant and generous boy, however, with fond affection, and while listening to tales of his dauntless and fiery valour, they would frequently think with pride how well he had realised all their hopes. But now they dared not even so much as breathe his name: the decree which had gone forth to deprive him of his lands and titles had released them also from their allegiance; he was no longer their lord; they were no longer his vassals. Still no tyranny could thus dispel at once from their minds all the fond reverence which had been instilled into them, even with their earliest lessons, by their fathers. They watched with feverish anxiety every turn in party politics, in the vague

hope that some change might again restore him to their love; and when they learned that he had succeeded in joining the other Ligueur chiefs, who were shut up in Paris, they rejoiced, and thought that all care for his safety might now be at an end.

For some time they had securely imagined that they would not have to belie their feelings by swearing fealty to any other than D'Espignac; and from the length of time, which had elapsed, since the first imprisonment of the old Count, and the gradually decaying state into which the chateau was falling from being so long uninhabited, they hoped that among the numerous cares and troubles by which the King was beset, he might have forgotten Avilly. But this was impossible: it was somewhat too near his own palace at Chantilly not to be a matter of the deepest importance that it should be occupied, while he was there, by some one on whose attachment he could rely; and accordingly, towards the close of winter, it was

duly and formally announced, that his Majesty had been pleased to bestow the domain of the traitor D'Espignac upon the true and loyal Count de la Vallée. The intelligence was received with gloom and disappointment. No shouts of welcome greeted the new comers as their gorgeous equipages and liveried attendants drove through the village to the chateau. Curiosity alone was depicted on the countenance of each loiterer as for a moment he paused to gaze on the splendid cavalcade, and then, having made his obeisance, turned aside to resume his employment with a sigh and a prayer for the absent Adhemar.

The haughty air of aristocratic pride which characterised the Count, formed a striking contrast to the benevolent smile of D'Espignac, and augured little future sympathy between the proud Lord and his vassals; while the vacant stare and listless yawn of the Countess demonstrated perfect indifference and thorough contempt for the good-will of such plebeian rustics.

In spite of prejudice, however, it was admitted that night, when the villagers were all assembled at the *veillée*, and the conversation naturally turned upon the new comers, that there was still one among them who appeared to view them with interest, and who had returned their humble salutations with ready good-nature. This was no other than the beautiful daughter of the Count, the fame of whose personal charms had even spread to the retirement of Avilly. Report had affianced her to the young Duke de Montbel, one of the most powerful nobles of the kingdom, and high in favour with the King; and it was moreover understood, that as soon as the court removed to Chantilly, the nuptials were to be solemnized with the greatest splendour, under the auspices of his Majesty.

Perhaps it might be these first impressions which rendered Estelle de la Vallée at once the most beloved of the family; and these kindly feelings being found to increase upon a closer acquaintance, it was soon deemed utterly im-

possible to extend to so mild and gentle a being the prejudice that existed against all of her name, as the successors of D'Espignac. Many of those to whom the misfortunes of the latter had doubly endeared him, and whose hearts now clung to him with fonder love than ever, would often detect themselves loitering to gaze on the light and graceful form of Estelle, as with fairy steps she wandered through the shadowy paths and verdant lawns of Avilly. It was remarked too, that she alone seemed to take delight in her new abode. The Count was absorbed in state affairs, and but seldom left his study; while the Countess, although, when surrounded by the splendour and gaieties of the Court, she was ever expressing the greatest love for the retirement of the country, now frankly confessed, that unless the old chateau underwent a thorough change, it would never suit her taste as a residence; and accordingly she instantly commenced devising plans for improvements, whereby to dazzle and surprise

the crowds of visitors with whom she kindly meant to share her solitude during the ensuing summer.

To speak truth, the King's choice of a tenant for Avilly had excited some surprise, and perhaps more discontent, among the herd of courtiers who had been long anxiously watching for its appropriation. Some had already enjoyed, by anticipation, the merry sport which its green forest would afford; while others had long ago begun to reckon how far the axe and bill-hook would enable them to replenish their coffers and re-establish their credit; and that so rich a prize should, at last, have been bestowed on an old Breton nobleman, who cared not for the chase, and had no debts, excited universal murmuring.

But Henry was just now in difficulty and distress; under such circumstances he cared not what price he paid for ready counsel; and this no one was so fitting to give as the Count de la Vallée.

It had often been said of the latter, that his appearance at Court was a sure token of coming evil; for the real fact was, that he was never summoned thither save when the King needed advice or assistance, which he would have found difficult to obtain from any other source. He had passed his life in crouching, and fawning, and plotting, and planning. He perpetually saw some mighty prize almost within his grasp, and yet, with all his artful policy and calculating ambition, he was as perpetually doomed to see hope after hope, and chance after chance, pass away to others far less artful and ambitious than himself. In fact, he was too cunning even for his own interests—for by disdaining to conceal the full extent of this quality, he had rendered even his employers wary and distrustful; and although ready to yield their admiration at the depth and prudence of his schemes, they were nevertheless careful not to allow him to retain too great a degree of power.

Catherine de Medicis, who could fathom the

human heart with all the tact of the ablest philosopher, had never permitted the Count de la Vallée to obtain undue ascendancy in her counsels. He was the very man to succeed in baffling the deep and well-digested intrigue of the adversary, by one yet more subtle and better planned; but, this service rendered, the recompense was always some high post of confidence, in some distant province, far from Court — a kind of honourable banishment — where he was suffered to remain, until his assistance was again required. He had assisted in all the dark plots under Charles the Ninth, and shared the odium and stigma with all who had participated in them: yet, by the same chance, which ever seemed to follow him, and for which he himself was at a loss to account, he had not been allowed to reap any solid advantage from their success; but was, as usual, obliged to content himself with a mere government of some emolument, but little real power, in Bretagne, where he had

ever since remained, watching the course of events, until once more summoned by the King, to assist in extricating him from his embarrassments.

It would have appeared that the gift of the rich domains of Avilly had now placed the Count at the very summit of his wishes. None breathed the word, but all *felt*, that it was the reward of some guilty service; and when it was rumoured that Adhemar d'Espignac had been compelled, through the cabals and factions of the Ligue, to quit Paris, each fancied that he had discovered the clue to the nature of that service. It was well known that emissaries, in the pay of the Royalists, lurked within the very walls of the capital; moreover, it needed but little reflection, to convince those acquainted with the King, that he would feel no disposition to cease from persecuting one, whom like Adhemar, he had injured beyond all redress. They doubted not, that La Vallée was employed to get the youth into his power;

and they could not but marvel at the peculiar fatality which had thus made his own heritage the price of his blood. But Henry, who inherited much of his mother's dread of overcunning counsellors, was far from yielding at once, all the power that so large an estate could bestow, into the hands of the Count. With a prudent foresight, almost worthy of Catherine herself, he had given it as the dowry of Mademoiselle de la Vallée, that the prime favourite, the Duke de Montbel, to whom she was betrothed, might claim it at his pleasure; and La Vallée, who was now determined upon advancement, preferred it, even thus shackled, to the prospect of another dull and powerless exile.

But to return. While the Count and Countess were thus occupied by their own plans within doors, Estelle was suffered to wander alone in the forest, and to ramble amid its solitudes without restraint. With the fearlessness of innocence, she would roam whole days among

its deepest recesses, charmed with their beauty, so different from La Vallée; which, being laid out under the superintendence of the Countess, presented nothing but an assemblage of rectangular flower-beds and quadrangular grass-plots. Not a single path in the neighbourhood of the chateau, however solitary, however gloomy, was left unexplored by the delighted Estelle; and soon every object became as familiar to her as the haunts of her childhood. There was Saint Hubert's holy fountain, where she would sit and read, from her book of golden legends, the history of this patron of huntsmen; and the round-table, in the very thickest of the wood, where, each succeeding year, the huntsmen of the forest would meet to celebrate the festival of their Saint by drinking and carousing: the cottage of old Jacqueline, too, so buried among the trees as to be scarcely perceptible, where she would stay and watch the humming wheel, as it spun beneath the venerable housewife's still nimble

fingers. To one, who had been accustomed from her earliest infancy to the humble subserviency of all around, there was novelty even in the shrewd observations and frank replies of the aged woman, whose prejudices against the "new family," as she called the tenants of the chateau, were strong and deeply-rooted. She had lived with the Countess d'Espignac, from her marriage to her death, and how could she bear to see a stranger tread those halls, which that beloved and beautiful lady had once graced with her presence? She had nursed and fondled the young Adhemar: through years of absence and sorrow she still retained for him all a mother's love; and she could view with little favour, the heiress of La Vallée, now roaming, joyous and happy, through the forest and solitudes of Avilly, while he was forced to wander, homeless and persecuted, and perhaps, even now, suffering the pangs of misery and want. At first, the presence of Estelle seemed to give her pain and

annoyance; but her irritation excited mirth, rather than anger, in the bosom of the laughing girl, who was bent on conciliating her; and by degrees, won by this gentleness, she relaxed much of her reserve; and finally, seemed to take pleasure in her visits.

It was then that Estelle would sit for hours and listen, while Jacqueline good-naturedly unfolded her store of legendary tales, all concerning the prowess and feats of arms of the valiant heroes of the "old family:" at the remembrance of whose renown, her eye would kindle with pride; and then, forgetting who was her listener, she would revert to the now mournful state of the house of D'Espignac: the sire, alas! no more; the heir a homeless wanderer,—until tears stole down her aged cheek, as she thought of their unhappy destiny.

Thus hour after hour would pass unheeded by, while Estelle, now lost in wonder at the marvellous adventures of the early lords of Avilly; anon, to the unspeakable admiration

of Jacqueline, moved to tears by the misfortunes of the present,—sometimes forgot how the moments flew, until the sound of the vesper bell, borne on the evening breeze, warned her to repair to her devotions, ere she returned to the chateau.

One evening, after listening to one of Jacqueline's most melancholy stories, her cheek still moist with tears, she proceeded, as usual, to the Chapel, situated in a solitary and romantic glen of the forest, and unsought by any, save a few peasants from the distant village, or the casual passer by, whose piety might lead him to enter, when summoned by the solemn tolling of the bell. Every thing about the little sanctuary was well calculated to inspire the deepest devotion. The loneliness of its situation, the overhanging dark green foliage, so thick as almost to exclude light from the little Gothic windows, and, above all, the mournful stillness which prevailed around, unbroken, save by the low

moaning of the wind through the lofty trees, filled the mind with melancholy, and raised the heart in humble aspiration to Heaven. Three friars belonging to the Chapter of Benedictines at Beauvais officiated by turns, and composed the whole of the humble establishment.

The good old fathers all knew and loved Estelle, as the most guileless and devout of their little flock; and since her arrival at the chateau she had never failed to present herself at the Chapel to join in the vesper hymn; but on the evening in question she had tarried over long with Jacqueline, and, as she slowly approached the little sanctuary musing on the mournful story to which she had been listening, the small silvery sound of the tinkling Angelus bell was alone heard, and announced that vespers had concluded. She quickened her pace, with a feeling of shame at the unusual lateness of the hour, and soon distinguished, through the open door, the sonorous voice of old father Paul chaunting the prayer which ended the service.

The little font at the entrance was never passed unheeded by her, and she now stopped to make the sign of the cross before she entered. While thus engaged, her attention was attracted by an unusual object in the porch on the outside of the chapel. No *sabots* were there, nor implements of husbandry, as was usually the case, when the pious peasants had entered on returning from their work; a richly ornamented rifle now stood against the wall, and by its side were negligently flung the baldric and powder-horn. Estelle started at sight of the weapon: she knew it could not belong to any of the poor huntsmen of the forest, for it was magnificently decorated, according to the fashion of the period, and the golden studs and massive silver ornaments were such as could only be attainable by persons of the highest distinction.

"It must be my father's," thought she, pausing on the threshold; "he is no doubt within. He must not see I have been weep-

ing; he would seek to know the cause, and what would he say were he to find I could weep for the sorrows of a D'Espignac?" She dried the tears from her cheek, and drawing aside the scarlet curtain in the doorway, she ventured in and looked anxiously round. A glance sufficed to show that her father was not there, for the high seat near the altar, always reserved for the lord of the manor, was vacant. She advanced with more confidence, yet with a soft and stealthy step, up the aisle, and sank on her knees just as the holy functionary turned to bestow his farewell blessing.

It appeared as though none of the usual congregation had lingered after vespers, for the Chapel seemed deserted by all save the friars, who were busily engaged in arranging it for the next morning's service ere they departed for the night. With all a woman's curiosity, the eye of Estelle, even while telling her beads, sought around for the owner of the rifle; but the tapers were extinguished; the

silver lamp which swung before the altar was not yet lighted; the uncertain twilight from without illumined but faintly the more distant parts of the building, and barely enabled her to discern that a figure was kneeling in the shadow of one of the stone pillars at the entrance, apparently deeply absorbed in prayer. It was the figure of a man: but what might be his age, or station, it was impossible to discover; and she was preparing to leave the chapel, with her curiosity ungratified, when, just as she had gained the door, the lamp was suddenly raised, and the brightness of the blaze causing her to turn, she distinctly beheld, in the same attitude of absorbing devotion, the object of her attention.

He was a young man, clad in the modest garb of the forest hunters, of the brightest emerald green, fitting tight to his figure, and with no ornament to distinguish the wearer, except that the belt which encircled his waist was clasped by a large buckle of massive gold.

Another circumstance, still more remarkable, and which served at once to convince Estelle he was a stranger, was, that by his side, instead of the high furred cap of the foresters, lay the large slouched hat and drooping feathers which had ever distinguished the Ligueurs of De Guise!

Now, it is well known that the only passion which solitude has not power to subdue is curiosity, and, moreover, that it frequently operates with most violence in the breasts of those who live in seclusion. It is not material to inquire if such were the case with the gentle Estelle; but it is nevertheless certain, that in this instance she appeared to find unusual difficulty in uniting the clasps of her richly-bound breviary, and her parting obeisance before the altar was lower and more solemn than usual. In short, had it not been for fear of observation, she would probably have lingered yet longer to catch a glimpse of the young stranger's features.

This, however, seemed impossible! he raised not his eyes, nor appeared in the slightest degree conscious of the presence of any one in the Chapel. It was difficult to decide whether he had been all this while engaged in prayer, or merely endeavouring to decipher the rude illegible characters engraven on the brassy tomb near which he knelt; for his head was bent low upon his bosom, and the long shining ringlets of jet black hair, falling forward, completely hid his face from the stealthy glances of the inquisitive maiden, who, with her thoughts still fixed on this mysterious young stranger, was at length compelled to hasten her steps homeward.

"Who can he be?" thought she, as emerging from the dark overhanging wood she entered one of those broad, light avenues which led to the chateau. "He is a stranger here, and the slouched hat and drooping plumes are those of the Ligueurs. They are now more bold and numerous than ever, and yet it seems

not over prudent in one of their number to be found upon my father's land." A sudden idea darted through her mind at this reflection: —"Heaven grant he be not here on any evil errand!" she murmured in alarm. "It is said that the murder of De Guise has roused all that is dark and deadly in the minds of the Ligueurs, and deep desire of revenge against the Royalists. My father is one of the King's staunchest adherents;—I tremble but to think what even now may be his danger! But no—how earnestly he prayed! It looks not as if he came with evil intent thus to seek the Chapel first. How foolish was my fear!—he is merely some follower of the D'Espignacs returning to his home after long absence, and ignorant of the changes which have taken place. When he has concluded his orisons, Father Paul will doubtless inform him of them, and to-morrow he will be found, with the other foresters, at the *rendezvous de chasse.*"

Thus endeavouring to allay her fears, she

quickened her pace, and would soon have gained the chateau, had not her progress been arrested by an incident, which, trifling as it may appear, had a prevailing influence on the issues of her after life.

She was just in the act of traversing one of those sweet, delicious *bosquets* by which the mansion was surrounded, when a little bird, which she had observed for some time hovering over her head, suddenly alighted on her shoulder, and before she had recovered from her surprise, the little flutterer, creeping beneath the folds of her dress, nestled fondly in her bosom. In an instant she recognised the martin belonging to the Chapel in the forest, which had ever been the object of her particular care, and which she had been in the daily habit of feeding when she repaired thither. But on this evening she had been so much engaged by her thoughts concerning the stranger, that she had forgotten her little favourite, who after having waited in vain for the food which

he was accustomed to receive from her hand, had followed her homeward in the hope of attracting her attention.

Every one must be aware of the high veneration which in France all classes, even to this very day, bear towards the martin. It has been held sacred from time immemorial, and its fondness for the human race has formed the subject of many a superstitious legend. Even the idle schoolboy, that sworn enemy to the feathered tribe in all other countries, in France would scorn to molest the mild and innocent *oiseau du bon Dieu*. It is found the constant occupant of the village church, where its clay-built nest remains for ever undisturbed beneath the consecrated rafters. It is no wonder, then, that at Avilly, where every living thing loved Estelle, one of these tame familiar birds should have soon learned to distinguish her from the other visitors of the Chapel; nor that the gentle maiden, whose kind heart overflowed

with love towards the whole creation, should view with fondness such a universal favourite.

Forgetting her haste, she paused to feed and soothe the little trembler, who, nestling with confidence in her bosom, returned her caresses with many a chirp of joyous satisfaction. She feared, however, to detain it long, for the shades of evening were fast stealing over the dark forest, and should the friars have left the Chapel, the door would be closed, and her tiny protégé be doomed to pass a night of danger and distress, excluded from its snug warm nest under the high beams of the roof. She therefore extended her hand to let it fly, prepared to watch with interest the marvellous instinct which taught it to direct its flight homeward without assistance.

She little dreamed of the alarm that awaited her; and her horror may be well imagined when, upon turning, she beheld a large and fierce night-hawk already beginning to describe

its charmed circle around the affrighted bird, whose plaintive cries reached her ear in the still silence of twilight, even from the height to which it had soared, in the vain hope of eluding its rapacious enemy.

Those who are aware how nearly akin to love is the feeling with which, from long habit, we are induced to regard any member of the dumb creation, when tame and dependent upon our kindness for its comforts, can best understand the distress of the tender-hearted Estelle at the peril of the holy *oiseau du bon Dieu.* Almost overcome by affright, she screamed aloud, hoping to attract some gardener or woodsman to the spot. But in vain! No one came. Still wheeling round and round, the fell night-hawk kept on his course, each circle bringing him nearer to his helpless victim, who, stupified and fascinated, seemed to have lost all power of attempting to escape.

"Ah Heaven! he is lost—he is lost!" she cried, as the hawk closed around his prey; and,

clasping her hands, she remained gazing in agony on the convulsive flutterings of the little creature who, but a moment before, had reposed with such happy security in her bosom. Its mournful cry penetrated to her very soul, as its feeble struggles served but to hasten the fate to which the terrible beak and talons of its cruel foe threatened in another instant to consign it. Already were its weak efforts to accelerate its flight becoming fainter from exhaustion, while its pursuer appeared to gather fresh strength with every turn; and the terrified maiden, who at that moment would have given all she possessed to shield her little favourite from the horrid death with which it was threatened, had ceased to entertain hopes of its escape, when suddenly the loud report of a gun rang through the wood—the savage hawk fluttered for a moment in the air, then—for the bullet had reached its mark—fell lifeless and bleeding at her feet.

She saw him fall. She beheld her beloved

martin fly towards the Chapel, and yet, as if not assured that the danger was over, she remained gazing upwards, as if she could still behold the fierce struggle which had caused her so much distress.

She was, however, recalled to herself by a voice from amid the thicket, immediately behind her. It was that of a man; and whether it was the joyful intelligence it conveyed, or the tone in which it was uttered, is uncertain, but Estelle thought it the softest and sweetest she had ever heard.

" Be not alarmed, Mademoiselle de la Vallée," were the words pronounced; " your favourite has escaped unhurt. It is his enemy that is now lying dead at your feet."

" Thank you, thank you !" said the maiden, as she sank half breathless against a tree; and, with ready generosity, she was in the act of drawing forth her purse to reward the hand which had so opportunely relieved her from her alarm, when the rustling of the boughs

announced the approach of him to whom she owed this unexpected aid; and looking up, she beheld, to her no small astonishment, the figure of the young hunter, whom she had just before left in the Chapel. He made her a low obeisance as he passed, and proceeding at once to where the hawk lay, he raised it, appearing to regard with all the keen interest of a sportsman, the wound inflicted by his own murderous weapon.

Estelle shrank back, for the sight of the Ligueur at that hour, and so near to the chateau, renewed all the fears she had before entertained for her father's safety; and filled with these impressions, she fixed a searching glance on the face of the stranger, as if she would have read his intentions in his countenance. His person, although youthful, was tall and martial, and, altogether, bore the impress of having participated in the fierce party struggles of the period. His features were strikingly handsome, and little calculated to

excite distrust, even in the most timid bosom; still there was a bold, resolute expression, in his proud dark eye, which overawed Estelle, and made her feel conscious that she should tremble beneath its glance. Her courage, however, seemed little likely to be put to the test, for the youth appeared scarcely aware of her presence. The instant he had perceived her, he had raised his hat from his head, and with well-bred courtesy remained uncovered; but afforded no other proof of a consciousness that he was standing before one of the fairest ladies of the Court. This slight homage was evidently extorted by her sex alone—not by her rank or beauty, although he had already pronounced her name, and could not fail to know her father's exalted station. Neither were his looks, for a single moment, directed towards herself; but in spite of his endeavours to appear engaged in examining the hawk, his eye would wander, with an expression that almost made her shudder, to an opening in the trees, which

afforded a view of the chateau, whose numerous casements, reflecting the rays of the setting sun, shone in the distance like burnished gold.

" It is even so," thought Estelle, as she caught one of those significant glances, " my father is in danger; how fiercely the young hunter turns his eye towards the chateau! Ah! doubtless *there* lies the object of his visit to this spot."

She still held the purse in her outstretched hand; the stranger having placed the hawk in the *gibecière* by his side, was already preparing to depart, without further notice than the same low obeisance which he had made upon entering her presence. " Stay! stay!" she cried, in a timid voice, as he was about to disappear among the trees. The youth turned instantly, and advanced towards her. " Here, take your reward," she continued, holding the purse towards him. She would have placed it in his hand, but her own was arrested by the

dark frown which had gathered on his brow, as waving back the gift, he replied sternly, "When the sportsman's bullet has sped aright, he needs no other recompense: and even when the aim is missed, it is not *gold* that can soothe his disappointment."

Estelle was piqued at the reply; it was an endeavour to undeceive her respecting his motive in shooting the bird; a wish that she should not imagine it was for her sake he had done so; and, accustomed as she had been all her life to the polished gallantry of the most polite court in Europe, this want of courtesy surprised her not a little.

Perhaps the young man himself might be aware of her thoughts at that moment; for colouring slightly, he added, in a milder tone, and with some embarrassment, "that having had the honour of serving Mademoiselle de la Vallée by *accident*"—he evidently laid a stress upon the word—"he must decline all recompense, hoping one day to render her more signal service."

"Nay! nay! refuse it not!" said the maiden meekly; for there was something of sarcasm in the stranger's speech which intimidated her; "take it now, lest you depart from Avilly while I am still your debtor; for I know you are a stranger here: you wear not the breast-knot of crimson ribbon, by which my father's foresters are all distinguished."

The youth started, as though her words had given him pain. He again fixed a long, earnest look towards the chateau, and replied, in a softened voice, "True, true, — you speak truly, Mademoiselle; I *am* a stranger, even at Avilly!" and leaning, with his hands crossed over the muzzle of his rifle, he again appeared lost in contemplation of the superb mansion, which, seen through the long unbroken avenue of trees, terminated the landscape.

There was another pause; and when he spoke again he had resumed the sullen and haughty tone which was so entirely new to the high-born maiden whom he addressed.

"You say rightly, Mademoiselle," said he;

"I *am* a stranger here, unknown to any: and yet, look you, already do I know you well; you are the daughter of the Count de la Vallée;—yonder lordly mansion is your abode. They are happy who thus dwell in palaces; *they*, at least, are known to *all*,—even to the poor wayfarer, whom chance may lead through their proud domains. The sun, in all his glory, causes not so much joy as their presence among those whom they justly reckon among the number of their slaves. Fortune has placed *them* on a lofty pinnacle, that they may be the more easily distinguished,—the more deeply adored. *Their* gilded smiles have the magic power of the conjuror, whose spell can force the strongest bolts and bars to fly asunder; even thus can a word from the lips of the rich man sever the ties of friendship, of love, of kindred. Nay, by the blood of the most holy martyrs! what can it not accomplish, since it has already wrested from D'Espignac the once faithful hearts of his followers! Do they not

already bow the knee to the stranger?—and think you there can dwell the smallest particle of love for *him* in bosoms that throb beneath the colours of La Vallée? No, no! the spell of wealth and power has rooted out all gratitude, remembrance,—nay, even courage, from their time-serving, faithless souls."

Estelle shrank from the withering glance which shot from his dark eye as he concluded, although it was not directed towards herself, neither was his speech addressed to her. It was evidently the outpouring of a lacerated and indignant spirit, roused anew by the sight of the haunts of his early days; and seeking relief in bitter and scornful upbraidings against the cowardice of those who had submitted to a change of masters without a struggle.

There was a pause of some moments; and when at length it was broken, it was by the soft voice of Estelle: she would gladly now have made her escape; but the hunter stood in the narrow path-way, so as to intercept her

passage, and she spoke, in order to recall his attention.

"Breathe not thus loudly the name of D'Espignac," said she; "you return from afar and know not all that has befallen him; he has long ago followed De Guise, and been pronounced a rebel and traitor—He—"

"'Tis false!" suddenly interrupted the stranger, striking the butt-end of his rifle against the turf, with a violence that made the silent forest echo, "'Tis false! false as the coward hearts of those who told you so!"

For the first time he turned his looks full on Estelle, who stood pale and terrified at witnessing the sudden transport of his anger, which she had involuntarily excited by her simple observation. His passion, fierce as it was, seemed checked at sight of that lovely and innocent being; for he placed his hand upon his brow as if to still its wild throbbings; and when he withdrew it, his countenance was more calm and composed. He spoke again,

soft and low, in the same sweet tones which Estelle had heard at first; and every word sank deep into her heart.

"Mademoiselle," said he, "they wrong D'Espignac who call him traitor. Behold, how yonder sun now sinks below the distant horizon; so did the fortunes of De Guise wax dim amid the false friends and open enemies by whom he was surrounded; and even as the shades of the forest grow darker as the sun declines, so the true heart of D'Espignac grew fonder, through the fading fortunes of his master. But mark the issue—*death* was his reward! They gloried in his fate—they revel in his possessions, and —but there yet lives one who is prepared to avenge his wrongs; and they who now slumber in fond security, basking in the sunshine of power, on his very threshold, shall find that—"

"Ah, no! say it not! say it not!" cried Estelle, almost shrieking, and bursting into tears, "you cannot, you will not seek to injure my father!" She would have sunk at his feet, but

he gently withheld her, gazing the while in mute admiration upon her lovely face and form, as, overcome by terror, she leaned on his outstretched arm.

"You have mistaken me," said he gently; "on the faith and honour of a soldier, none of the race of D'Espignac will seek to harm your father. It would give, indeed, but small pleasure to Adhemar, to know that evil should befall any for *his* sake. It cannot save his father *now;* and he comes of a race who love the pitched tent and open field, but use not the poisoned bowl, or assassin's dagger, to avenge their wrongs."

"I know it! I know it!" exclaimed Estelle, still sobbing with agitation; "Jacqueline, who loves them well, has ofttimes told me so."

"Ha!" exclaimed the youth, his features suddenly lighting up at the name—"do you know old Jacqueline? Does she ever speak of D'Espignac? She has not then forgotten him, like the rest of those who had sworn to follow him till death?"

"Ah, no! she ever mentions Adhemar with all a mother's love. She loves to tell of his valiant deeds, and often—"

"Hark!" said the youth, interrupting her, "I hear voices approaching; they are seeking you through the forest: they are as yet far distant; but danger has sharpened my sense of hearing, and already can I distinguish your name."

"Fly!" said Estelle eagerly, "you know not my father; he is good and generous, but it is not natural that he should view with favour those who openly follow the party of De Guise; here, I pray you take this purse, and hasten to depart in safety."

"Thank you, thank you," said the young man, smiling kindly, "I do not need it. In short I—"

"Nay, nay, refuse it not;—take it, then, as a small token of acknowledgement for the service you rendered me in shooting the cruel hawk."

He again put it aside. "You must—you shall

accept it," she continued; and dropping it at his feet, she rushed past him, and fled up the avenue which led to the chateau.

The hunter leaned upon his rifle, and stood to watch her till she was out of sight. "How gentle,—how lovely she is!" he murmured to himself; "how unlike the race from which she springs!—a very dove in the eagle's nest!"

His eye was dim, and he proceeded to leave the spot. "Ha! the silken purse—she threw it at my feet!" he exclaimed, as the glittering bauble caught his sight. "Well, well! 'twas kindly meant, and 'tis not seemly to refuse a lady's gift; and—and—they come but seldom now."

Thus saying he stooped to raise it, and, contemptuously flinging out the gold, with which it was well-stored, he placed the empty purse in his belt, and disappeared amidst the depths of the forest.

## CHAPTER II.

"On peut quelquefois être plus fin qu'un autre, mais pas plus fin que tous les autres." LA ROCHEFOUCAULD.

ON arriving at the chateau, Estelle was not slow in perceiving that some extraordinary event had taken place during her absence. The Countess, secluded in her own apartment with Mademoiselle Taquine, her confidante; the domestics hurrying to and fro, their countenances expressing unusual importance; the bright smiles and sparkling glances which met her at every turn, all served to convince her that some unlooked-for news had been received that day Her curiosity was on the stretch; but this feeling soon gave way to fear, on being summoned

to attend her father in his study. It was the first time she had ever felt alarm at the command; but she knew his hatred of the Ligueurs, and it was with one of the party that she had just been conversing almost beneath the very walls of the chateau. It was her duty to let him know this, that measures might be taken for the intruder's apprehension. But no — he had sworn he came not to injure La Vallée, and she could not willingly consign to ruin one who had rendered her a kindly service, and of whom she knew nothing, save that he already appeared wronged and unhappy. It was thus that the resolve was taken to conceal from every one her interview with the hunter;—and however the stern moralist may condemn this resolution as an act of filial delinquency, it was nevertheless a fault which leaned to virtue's side. It cannot be said that she sought to disguise from herself the fact, that she already felt interested for the young stranger, for she knew it not. But such, however, was the case. A single glance of her own mild blue eye had

subdued the fierce and stormy passion of a dauntless Ligueur, who dwelt with all the bitterness of party animosity on her father's name, and, moreover, used no endeavour to conceal his prejudice. Such involuntary homage was worth all the hackneyed flattery of the Court; but, at the moment, she dreamed not that gratified vanity had any share in the secret hope which she entertained that he might escape her father's power.

With trembling step and beating heart she entered the Count's apartment. He was alone, and seated at a table; upon it lay an open packet, which he had evidently been engaged in perusing, and Estelle, all unpractised as she was in state affairs, instantly perceived that it bore the royal signet.

The Count was apparently absorbed in meditation, with his head resting on his hands, and his eyes fixed on the writing before him. He knew not of her entrance until she had softly approached and laid her hand on the arm

of the chair in which he was seated. "Ha, Estelle! is it thou?" he said, as he raised his eyes; "come hither, love, and sit thee down beside me. I have much to tell thee concerning thine own good fortune."

Estelle drew a stool, and seated herself at her father's feet. She took one of his hands, and, pressing it between her own, looked up tenderly into his face, and thus awaited his commands in silence. The Count gazed at her with fondness: he parted the golden hair from her forehead, and looked with pride on her beautiful countenance. Denied by Providence that great boon of male progeny, which, with those possessing wealth and titles, is ever considered the one great blessing, all the love, all the gentler affections of his stern, ambitious nature were centred in his beauteous daughter. He exulted in that surpassing loveliness which had won the love of the highest nobleman of the Court; and, as his eye wandered over that sweet blushing face, he rejoiced that it was

his child who laid claim to the distinction of the richest and most beautiful heiress in the kingdom.

" Thou hast tarried long in the forest to-night, love," said he ; " I began to fear for thy safety, when I heard the gun of the garde-chasse close to the chateau ; wert thou not also alarmed, dearest ?"

" I was, dear father, and hurried home," said Estelle, blushing at her own disingenuousness.

" Thy mother heard it not ; she is doubtless engaged with Taquine, devising the fashion of a new court robe, for the King will shortly arrive at Chantilly. Ha ! what thinkest thou, my little Duchess de Montbel ? Does that name sound welcome in thy ears, Estelle ?" He fondly patted her cheek, and endeavoured to smile. " It will soon be thine, love," he continued ; " Montbel accompanies the King, and he bids me tell thee his nuptials must not be delayed : and hearken ! thou must meet with

becoming pride the affected airs of yonder haughty popinjay. "Forget not—thy dowry, this lordly chateau, with its broad domains, joined to the sweetest face and fairest form in Christendom, may well weigh against all he has to offer—high favour and sounding titles, although another has just been added to the list, and he be now hailed Grand Chamberlain."

Estelle started, for she knew that her father had long coveted this appointment, and had, moreover, relied on the King's professions of friendship for the realization of his wishes. She keenly felt his disappointment, and could not help regretting that it had been bestowed upon her future husband. But La Vallée appeared anxious that his daughter should not witness his irritation; he therefore hastened to resume his discourse, although the gloomy frown, which the mention of De Montbel's name had excited, was still visible upon his brow.

"It was to bestow advice concerning thy future deportment, that I summoned thee here,

love," said he: "I speak not of courtly grace and majesty of presence, concerning these thy mother will give thee fitting counsel; but thou knowest that the eyes of the whole Court will henceforward be fixed upon thee, as the promised wife of the Duke de Montbel, bosom friend of the King, and Grand Chamberlain; and in that high station, second to none in the kingdom, but the Sovereign himself, there is much wherein a father's experience may guide thee. Thou art aware how sanguine was my hope to obtain the charge with which De Montbel has so lately been honoured; yet, think not there exists in my bosom the slightest jealousy at the preference shown to him; it was but for thy sake I desired it,—that the world might consider thee in every respect his equal."

This Estelle knew to be false; she was but an inexperienced judge of human nature, yet the bitterness with which her father spoke, and the dark cloud upon his countenance, betrayed but too plainly the indignation he felt at

Henry's injustice and neglect. He pondered for awhile, and then resumed.

" Remember, love, the Duchess de Montbel will have other cares and duties than those which occupy the thoughts of Estelle de la Vallée. She can and will greatly aid her fond father in the many plans he has formed to realize most important ends, and in which, she may rest assured, ambition has no share."

The heart of the maiden sank within her. Of all the world, she was the most unfit for court intrigues or party machinations ; and she shrank with dread at the prospect of being forced to take a part in those dark and busy plots in which, at that time, all near the throne, the fair sex not excepted, were deeply engaged. She listened with feverish eagerness as the Count continued.

" From this very hour thou mayest yield me thy assistance ;—nay, start not, the task is not difficult. For the sake of yonder beardless De Montbel, I have been unjustly deprived of the

high office which the King had encouraged me to expect; but if thou wilt aid me, I may yet rise to greater power than even that could confer. I have good reason to believe that the retreat of the outlaw Adhemar d'Espignac is known to many of the peasants of Avilly; but I were a fool to think that either threats or promises could compel them to betray him. Nevertheless, there is a sure way to discover it: thou, love, hast won the hearts of these wild foresters by mingling amongst them, while the Countess and myself were fully occupied in endeavouring to gain influence elsewhere; and, with all thy artlessness, it is plain that thou hast pursued the wiser path." He cast a gloomy look at the open letter before him, and continued. "Now, this intimacy thou mayest turn to good account; it is but feigning sorrow for the hard fate of the youth, and promising secrecy — a promise which of course thou wilt be ready to break when called upon;—and I warrant me, thou wilt do more

towards raising thy father to dignity and honour, than he has been able to accomplish by a life of perseverance and study. Henry hates D'Espignac! the young man is the most turbulent among the Ligueurs. De Guise incited him to revenge his father's death, and now that the former is no more, Adhemar has sworn not to rest till he has avenged them both. Now, I would wager my right hand, that the King would wellnigh bestow his throne on the man who would deliver up the Count into his power, so that he might feel himself once more free from danger. Such was his dread of the rebel, that he has had emissaries in Paris to keep an eye upon his movements: even De Lognac has lent his aid; and thus they became acquainted with all he did; until suddenly they missed him from the capital, and no one can now tell whither he is gone. We thought he had returned to raise the peasants on his own land, and it is but this moment I learn, that while we have been seeking him in holes and

corners through his native woods, (forgetting, in our haste, that none but cowards fly to solitary hiding-places,) he has fled in secret from the Ligue, in hot desire of revenge, and even joined the King of Navarre, while the rebels remain inactive within the walls of Paris, that he might lose no chance of wreaking vengeance on his father's and De Guise's murderer. In disguise, and under a borrowed name, he has worked marvels for De Bourbon; but now they have again lost all trace of the youth, he being doubtless in dread (so De Montbel's silly letter hath it) of the King's power. Ha! ha! as if Adhemar d'Espignac, who, by all accounts, has the spirit of the untamed lion, should be daunted by the dread of death, or know any thing more of fear, than the mere name."

The scoffing tone and bitter sneer did not escape Estelle, and she was convinced that some grievance, yet untold, lurked in her father's mind. At another time it would have passed

unnoticed, but now each word and look was scrutinized with trembling attention.

"Nay, but why should his fear be greater now than heretofore?" she asked; "is he not as safe as ever with Henry of Navarre?"

"No," replied the Count, changing colour as he spoke; "none of those who loved De Guise can now be secure with the King of Navarre: his forces are united with those of the King, and together they hope shortly to crush for ever De Mayenne, the chief of the Ligue, and restore peace and happiness to France. It is at Chantilly that they intend to ratify the treaty. De Montbel it is whose schemes have thus brought them together, and the dignity *I* so long have coveted is his reward!"

He paused for a moment, as if musing, then suddenly exclaimed, in a hurried tone, while his eye flashed fiercely, "But, by Heaven! it must not long remain thus. Thou wilt do as I bid thee: exert thy influence among the women of the hamlet,—they have loving

hearts, but busy tongues, and will not so much as dream of treachery in one of their own sex. There is old Jacqueline, the *vachère*, for instance; I warrant me she knows well enough where the young Count may be found: feign but the slightest interest in his fate, and she will tell thee, were it but to hear him pitied for the poorness of his lodging! Fear not for thy father; Adhemar is helpless,—helpless as the new-born babe! The chiefs of the Ligue have fancied, like headstrong fools, that he had deserted their cause to fly to the standard of Henry of Navarre; even Guillaume Rose, the Bishop of Senlis, in whose diocese this estate lies, who has known him from his birth, and loved him as his own son, has now refused to grant him aid. Thus thou seest he would fall an easy prey. Once let me be master of the secret of his retreat, and my success is certain: the glorious issue now floats before my fancy in true and vivid colours!"

He waved his arm proudly aloft, while with

one hand he grasped, with more and more violence as his energy increased, that of his daughter, who, silent and breathless, listened with feelings of horror to her father's injunctions.

"Yes, I see it all," he continued: "thou wilt discover,—I will betray:—D'Espignac mounts the scaffold,—the haughty spirit of the Ligueur chiefs is humbled with the dust,—Henry is grateful;—and then,—ha! ha!—and then," he laughed and looked wildly round, "why then, De Montbel, sweet son-in-law, thy artifice is vain: La Vallée will yet be the greater man!"

The imagination, once excited by the soaring dreams of ambition, is not easy to be checked; and the Count paused, while visions of future greatness floated through his brain. But a scalding tear fell upon his outstretched hand, and soon awoke him from his trance: he started, and turned to his daughter: one single look, and all his airy schemes had vanished like mist before the morning sun. Her head rested

on his knee, and her face was buried in the rich folds of his velvet surcoat, while the gushing tears forced their way through her slender fingers, and her whole frame shook with the violence of her agitation. The Count stared, as though he had doubts of the reality of what he saw.

"Why, Estelle, thou art not, surely, weeping?" he said at length, in a tone of astonishment.

A deep bursting sob was the maiden's only answer. He raised her head, and gazed upon her face; it was pale as marble, and bathed in tears.

"It is well," said he gloomily; "I thought of thee only as my child, and forgot thou wert a woman. Never dreaming thou wert so large a sharer in the maudlin weakness of thy sex, I was fool enough to imagine thee capable of aiding me to regain that which I have lost,—power and influence with the King; trusting that the blood which flows in thy veins would not fail to keep alive that pride and love of

distinction which have ever belonged, as of right, to our ancestors. It matters not,—I have been deceived. Wise was he who spoke the word, 'Put not thy faith in woman:' it was well said, few indeed are they who can be trusted; and go, thou art not of the number. Thou wouldst make truly but a sorry spy! I doubt much, wert thou even to meet one of the accursed Ligueurs here on our own land, whether any consideration for my interest would induce thee to give the alarm. In truth I should not wonder, such is thy milky nature, to see thee take part with my enemies. I warrant me they will be luckless enough, ere long, and greatly need the pity thou art so ready to bestow."

He arose, and pushed back the chair with violence, and Estelle, missing the support, sank from the low stool on her knees before him!

Had he at that moment cast his eyes towards his daughter, he would have seen her start, and turn even paler than before, when he uttered

his concluding observation; but he did not notice her: with his arms folded, he paced the apartment to and fro, and for a few moments the sound of his footsteps on the chequered floor, and the low sobs of the maiden, were alone heard. At length he stood still, and turned again to Estelle:—"Go!" said he, in that calm, deliberate tone, which seemed even more terrible than the direst transport of anger; "I seek not your assistance, Mademoiselle de la Vallée. Without it, I may not be able to accomplish all I had hoped for. But, Heaven be praised! alone, unaided, and unrewarded, except in the accomplishment of my object, can I punish my rival, De Montbel, the man whom I hate beyond all upon earth; and verily, did I think 'twould grieve his heart to lose thee, as I live thou shouldst not wed him! for the pleasure of such revenge, would I forego even the honour of calling the King's own Chamberlain my son-in-law."

He paused; for rage choked his utterance. Estelle raised her eyes, and gazed in wild

amazement on his countenance. In an instant her tears were dried, while a burning blush of shame, indignation, and wounded pride, mantled in her cheek, and tingled through every vein. The Count recoiled a few paces; he perceived her confusion, but mistook the cause.

"Ha! I see it all," he exclaimed; "thou lovest De Montbel! Nay, blush not a deeper red. I did not think it had been so; but no matter—'tis natural that the young should take part with the young.—Besides, is not De Montbel handsome? ay, marry, is he handsome! and well does he know it, too. Ha, ha! I doubt much if he would yield the palm of beauty even to thee, my girl, all lovely and blooming as thou art! My senses must have wandered, when I fancied thou wouldst aid me to rival thy lover in the King's favour; in truth, I might as well, and with as much success, have craved to share with him thine own affections; it would seem over bold in me to claim the smallest place in the heart which he occupies so largely."

"Nay, but, dear father, I love him not," said Estelle, at length stung to the quick by the cruel taunts; "but say, it is not long since thou thyself didst bid me view him with kindly feelings, and even while striving to obey, I thought not once of love."

The Count eyed her for a moment, as if to assure himself she was not seeking to deceive him; but although his ever restless and vigilant ambition, and the uncertainty of court favour, had rendered him a keen observer of the slightest shades of the human countenance, he could not detect the least symptom of deceit on her open brow.

"She is mine once more!" he thought, surveying her in triumph; "she loves thee not, De Montbel; yet a little patience, and still can I mould her to my purpose. She shrinks from the task with the childish pity of her sex and age, but soon will I overcome her scruples, and my object will be gained at last."

Hope once more revived within him. He was not the man to abandon a project of so

much importance to his interests, for the sake of indulging in useless and unavailing transports of passion; and appearing at once to forget all cause of displeasure, he reassumed the insinuating tenderness of manner, which he so well knew would not fail to soothe, in the guileless bosom of Estelle, all those feelings of disgust, which his previous remarks might have excited. He bent low over her graceful form as she knelt, and folded her in his arms.

"Come to my heart once more, my own sweet Estelle," said he; "I wronged thee sorely, in thinking thee unwilling to aid my designs. It was fear that made thee say thou wouldst not use thine endeavours to discover young D'Espignac: was it not, dearest?"

"Nay; but I said not so," replied Estelle; entirely thrown off her guard by the artful manner of the Count.

"Ha!" exclaimed the latter, with well-feigned surprise, "can it be possible that thou really didst not say this just now? What—

didst thou not refuse me? Then art thou still my own darling child; still wilt thou be the means of preserving Avilly to thy father! Remember, love, it is thy dowry, and this it is that has caused all my terror, lest it should depart from us. I know well that Henry of Navarre loves the young Count; he has fought beneath his standard, and rely upon it, he will not sign the treaty which is to bind him to the King, except the latter agree to pardon this young Ligueur, and restore him to his possessions. The King will not dare refuse. Avilly would thus be lost to us; and thou wouldst lose De Montbel. He is sordid and ambitious, ever on the watch to climb to wealth and power, and would not hesitate to forsake thee for a wealthier bride! Couldst thou bear this, Estelle de la Vallée? couldst thou bear to see all thy father's hopes in thee pass away like a dream? Is it not worse—ay, worse a thousand times than the very fate we are compelled, for our own sakes, to prepare for Adhemar? How

could we bear the taunts and sneers of the Court—the triumph of our enemies—or, what is worse, the drivelling compassion of our mere professing friends? No, no!—Heaven be praised! such evil will be avoided by thy perseverance; it is now thou canst show thy affection for thy doting father, by following his counsel; wilt thou do so, sweet love?"

He had clasped her in his arms while he yet spoke, and his voice had sunk almost to a whisper; he could feel her tremble in his embrace, but yet she wept not, and seemed scarcely conscious of the purport of his speech.

"Now is my time to urge her farther," he thought; "she is passive, and will soon consent."

He pressed her closer to his bosom—her heart was beating with violence, although her face betrayed no emotion.

"Speak, Estelle, dearest," he continued aloud, and more vehemently than before; "think, if Avilly be wrested from us, then

will De Montbel wed another: thou wilt never be his bride."

The words seemed to act like a spell upon his daughter; she started from her trance, and raising her eyes, fixed them upon his dark but softened lineaments, while she answered with a firmness which he had little expected:

"Yes, I will do in all, dear father, as thou hast desired."

The tone of her voice was deep and almost hoarse, but La Vallée noticed it not amid the tumult of delight with which he listened to her reply.

"What! in all, didst thou say? in all?" he exclaimed in breathless eagerness.

"In all, dear father," returned Estelle, with the same apparent calmness as before.

"Now, Heaven bless thee, my own Estelle!" cried the Count in raptures; "still art thou well worthy of all the love which is felt for thee by thy fond, thy idolizing father!"

Estelle answered not, nor returned the pres-

sure of his hand, but remained still on her knees, silent and motionless, beside him. The Count raised her; he well knew that this seeming firmness was but the effect of overstrained emotion; and, with subtle policy, resolved she should depart while it yet lasted, that he might not witness the first burst of anguish when recollection returned, and the promise she had given, so contrary to her mild character and gentle disposition, recurred with all its horror to her mind.

"Now, hie thee to thy chamber, love," said he: "to-morrow thou shalt repair to Jacqueline; but now, speed to thy rest, thou art agitated and weary. Seek not thy mother to-night; and, above all, be not seen of that busy meddling Taquine, who, were she once to see that thou hadst been weeping, would not leave thee, till she had drawn from thee the cause of thy sorrow."

Estelle, still in silence, prepared to obey the Count's injunction, but she appeared unable to

walk without support, and he therefore led her from the room, dreading lest her long suppressed agitation might burst forth before she could gain her apartment, and thus afford cause of wonder and speculation to the domestics of the chateau. He would have been pleased had she but given the slightest token that she was sensible of all the kind expressions of endearment with which he endeavoured to soothe her in their way to the chamber; but she appeared scarcely conscious of external objects, and although a deep hectic flush had succeeded to the paleness of her cheek, her countenance had undergone no other change; and still insensible to her father's caresses, she suffered him to close the door and depart without betraying the least sign of consciousness.

It was not until the Count's footsteps had died away in the corridor, that Estelle first moved from the spot where he had left her. There was no light in the apartment, except that afforded by the moonbeams, which streamed

through the painted casement, towards which she suddenly advanced, as if to gaze on the landscape without. Her breathing was short and thick, and she trembled violently; while with hurried fingers she tore the scarf from her throat, as though its removal would give her relief. It was stained with the blood of the hawk, which the young hunter had shot in the forest. At another time, she would have regarded the deep red spots as an evil omen; but now her mind was so full of the recollection of her present misery, that she cared too little for the future to notice it. She leaned her head against the gothic frame of the casement.

"My fond father!" she exclaimed at length, while an expression of withering scorn overspread her agitated features, "My idolizing father! who loveth me better than his life!—ha! ha!" and she laughed hysterically;—"he has said in his heart, I alone can deceive, and none else beside me!—Estelle is mine:

she will love at my bidding, and hate when I command. She will for my sake betray an innocent stranger to the scaffold, that she may riot in his possessions, and wed the man—whom I despise beyond all upon earth!"

She gasped convulsively. "Ah, 'tis want of air that chokes me thus!" she said, and flinging back the casement with violence, and leaning out, she suffered the chill night-blast to blow upon her cheek. It was one of the cold nights in the early part of spring; a white sheet of frost, rendered whiter by the moonlight, enveloped the budding trees and the greensward of the park; but Estelle shrank not from the keen and cutting north breeze; she fancied it would bring relief to her burning brow, and dispel the painful sense of suffocation she experienced. "'Tis false!" again she murmured; "my father loves me not.—No—no—'tis false—'tis false!—for himself alone does he feel the all-engrossing love which he feigns for me. But I too can deceive, I too can play

a double part, and feign compliance when I mean it not: never will I betray to death the rightful heir of Avilly — may it be his once more! This is my most fervent prayer, since to such condition is attached the chance—nay, to me is it not a hope?—that De Montbel may wed another. To-morrow I will obey my father, and seek out Jacqueline; not to draw from her the secret of Adhemar's retreat, but to warn her of his danger."

This resolve appeared somewhat to soothe her agitation; she arose, closed the casement, and continued to muse, until sorrow gradually succeeded to indignation, and she wept in bitterness of spirit, unchecked and unrestrained, over her disappointed hopes and chilled affections. Until this hour Estelle had loved, nay, almost idolized her father; she had hitherto regarded him as the model of all human excellence. With those confiding feelings so usual in persons of her timid nature, she felt admiration for the very qualities which

she did not herself possess,—the boldness and decision of his character, so unlike the gentle, feminine weakness of her own; with firm reliance on his keen-sighted and vigilant affection, she had accepted her future husband at his hands, nor once dared to question the fitness of his choice.

"De Montbel is vain and frivolous," she would often say, "but my father can judge better than I of the man to whom he intrusts my happiness. He who is himself so generous and noble, cannot fail to discover honour and faith in others."

Such had once been her thoughts concerning him, and in proportion to this love were now the grief and disappointment she felt, when the conviction of his utter selfishness forced itself upon her mind. He could sacrifice her to one whom he himself pronounced sordid and worthless, for the sake of his own aggrandizement; but even this he would forego for the sake of a mean and dastardly revenge. And

in all this struggle between grasping pride and jealousy, her feelings were not considered; she was as nothing in her father's calculations. This it was which harrowed up her soul; and that night she retired to rest with her mind full of such bitter thoughts as she had never before experienced.

It was early the next morning when she arose, still weary, and unrefreshed from her sleepless pillow. She felt unequal to the pain of beholding her father: she knew that she could as yet but ill support his scrutinizing glance; and fearing that her wan and haggard looks would warn him how little faith could be placed in her promises, she hastened to leave the chateau, hoping that the Count might have sought his study before she should return.

She walked slowly across the park to the wood, and took the path which led to old Jacqueline's cottage. The remembrance of the young hunter crossed her mind, as she drew near to the spot where she had met him on the

previous evening. The marvellous skill he had displayed in shooting the hawk—his noble and gallant bearing—the glance of his proud, dark eye — all rushed to her recollection, accompanied by a vague, undefined interest in his fate, that even the opposite emotions by which she had since been agitated, could not entirely banish ; while the thought of his danger, should he be discovered, in her father's present state of irritation, caused her to quicken her step. It was evident he knew Jacqueline — he had visited her cottage ere this ; and had he not yet taken his departure from Avilly, the old woman would find means to warn him of the peril in which he stood. As she entered the dark and narrow pathway, by which she had escaped homeward, her heart beat somewhat faster than before ; for the same loud rustling was heard among the trees as had then preceded his approach. She paused to listen, and a faint blush rose to her cheek, as she distinguished

the sound of footsteps advancing over the crackling underwood. She doubted not that it was the stranger concerning whom her mind was occupied at the moment. She hesitated for an instant, uncertain whether to retrace her steps or to await his presence, again to renew her solemn entreaties that he would fly, and not loiter to abide her father's resentment. She paused, while the footsteps drew nearer. Presently she could hear the short, thick breathing as of one who had been running fast; and the next moment, with a surprise not unmingled with disappointment, she beheld first the goodly cap and pinners, and then the twinkling grey eyes and rubicund nose of Mademoiselle Taquine, elevated above the bushes.

"Ah! what," she exclaimed, after stopping to take breath, "I have overtaken you at last! Why, truly, one would think you had borrowed Fortune's wings! Even by forcing my way through the tangled coppice-wood, I verily

believe, had you not suddenly stopped, I should have gained nothing for my pains but a tattered kirtle."

She held up her arm, laughingly, to show the rent in her sleeve, and again proceeded, with infinite toil and difficulty, to extricate herself from the few remaining brambles. Estelle prepared herself, with most heroic fortitude, to endure the volley of questions, suppositions, and wonderments which she knew Taquine had in reserve; for nothing but the discovery of some important secret, she was well assured, could ever have tempted the good lady to wander thus early from the chateau, she being usually engaged at this hour in watching and tormenting the domestics, and prying with the greatest minuteness into all the affairs of the household.

"Thank Heaven! I am free," said she, at length, when, after much squeezing and pushing, she had succeeded in forcing an entrance into the open path; "and now, I hope I have

not toiled in vain. One gains much knowledge by rising betimes. I once thought the Count, your father, impenetrable; but now I have found out all his secrets !—he-he ! Nay, look not so alarmed: I warrant I can keep them, at any rate, as well as he, who, lest he should be tempted to tell them to others, unburthens his mind by talking to himself !"

" Good Heavens ! Taquine, you have been listening !—what have you overheard ?" exclaimed Estelle, now really alarmed, and thinking of her conversation with her father on the preceding evening.

" Nay, nay," replied Taquine, " I have as yet only heard the riddle; it is to you I come for the solution."

Estelle breathed more freely; but Taquine gave her no time to reply, for she proceeded to detail, with uncontrollable volubility, the circumstances which had raised her curiosity.

" You know, Estelle, love," said she, " that I have hitherto been considered the earliest

riser in the chateau; but this morning, as I descended the great staircase, I heard some one already stirring in the gallery. Now, there could not be the least harm in looking to see who it could be; so I peeped through the door, which stood ajar, and judge of my surprise on beholding the Count de la Vallée standing at the open casement, and gazing intently towards the forest. I knew him too well to fancy that it was merely the beauties of a fine spring morning which occupied his attention: no, no, with all reverence be it spoken, he cares no more for such beauties than I do myself. Well, I stole gently in, and walked to another window; and, looking in the same direction, I instantly perceived my little Estelle tripping through the park. I must confess I was somewhat disappointed in my hopes of having discovered a mystery; for in the country one often lacks food for conversation; even the Countess and myself are sometimes at a loss. But alas! there was nothing to

wonder at, to find a kind father engaged in watching his darling child; so I was just preparing to depart, to overlook the maids at their churning, when suddenly I heard some one speaking behind me—I turned—it was the Count himself—only think, Estelle! Your father, so grave, so taciturn, talking to himself! Now here, indeed, was matter for astonishment. There could be no harm in trying to know what he might have to say, so I stopped to listen."

"What said he? what said he?" exclaimed Estelle, forgetting in her eagerness the impropriety of encouraging this breach of confidence.

"'Twas all concerning you," returned Taquine. 'My own Estelle!' said he, fondly, 'how quickly she speeds on her errand! may Heaven prosper the undertaking she—!'"

"Ha! said he so?" exclaimed Estelle, almost breathless—"then Heaven will surely heed a father's benediction!"

"But what hast thou undertaken, dear Estelle? it is that I would know," interrupted Taquine, whose curiosity seemed whetted by the manner in which her communication had been received; "I can surely aid thee in any—"

"Nay, nay, what did he say more?" exclaimed Estelle, impatiently.

"Ah! there lies the mystery!" returned Taquine, drawing close to Estelle, and whispering in her ear; "he gazed after you till you had entered the forest: 'Ha!' said he, 'she takes the very path! I dared not hope such quick obedience in one of her gentle nature; but verily it gives me joy: I find she is, in heart and soul, a daughter of La Vallée. I seem to have touched the right chord in her bosom: the fear of losing Montbel and Avilly has quickened her steps, even on an errand of treachery!" And then he laughed so loud, that I was enabled to traverse the gallery, and gain the door, unheard and unnoticed."

"My father knows me well," said Estelle, gloomily, as her cheek assumed the hue of death. "But said he nothing more, Taquine?"

"I have told you all, Estelle; now you will tell me your secret. What is the undertaking of which your father spoke? Come, now, and sit at the foot of yonder tree, and I will give you my advice."

Estelle was too much agitated to answer, and Taquine led her to the place she had pointed out. It was the very tree against which she had stood on the evening before, when she met the hunter; and the first object which now greeted her sight, was the night-hawk, which then caused her so much alarm, already nailed against the trunk. She was startled—it was a proof the young man still lingered about the spot; and, for the moment, her own cares were absorbed in anxiety for his safety. It was cruel to neglect the means of preserving him from the fate which awaited him, should he be discovered by her father's

emissaries. A sudden thought struck her. Taquine, although busy and inquisitive, was tender-hearted; and she could rely with security on her ready aid to apprise him of his increasing danger. Taquine, moreover, could act without suspicion; her behaviour had long ceased to be accounted strange by any within the chateau, and no one now took notice of her actions. She resolved to ask the good lady's advice, and act as she should direct; besides, it would serve to draw her attention from more important matters, of which it was of the utmost consequence that she should know nothing. She accordingly seated herself at the foot of the tree, and was preparing to reveal her secret, when, to her great astonishment, instead of listening with all the eagerness of curiosity, Taquine suddenly started up, and uttering a scream of joy, sprang forward to the bushes opposite, through which the hunter had passed, and which yet showed traces of his progress.

"Gold, as I live!" she exclaimed, thrusting her hand into the long grass, and, presently drawing it forth, displayed to the astonished eyes of Estelle a broad piece of some value. The lucky finder almost shrieked with delight. "Only see what a sum! *La bonne Sainte Vierge!* was ever such good fortune! The first thing in the morning, too! Depend on it, I am destined to find a treasure ere noon, and be a princess ere night. Look, Estelle! broad pieces, gold angels, and silver marks, without number! Oh, I must run home this instant, to show my good luck to those envious maids in the dairy. Besides, it will be goodly proof of the advantage of early rising."

Thus saying, away she flew towards the chateau, leaving Estelle to pursue her path unmolested, in the enjoyment of her own reflections. It would be difficult to imagine the tumult of emotions which assailed her hitherto peaceful bosom. She rejoiced, but alas! with a bitter joy, in the certainty that her father

was so completely deceived; and she sped on her errand with a surer prospect of success. She would spare no endeavour to save Adhemar: she would hurry on to Jacqueline, to bid her seek out the young Ligueur also, and warn him to depart, ere yet the Count should discover that he was in the forest. Perhaps he would yield to the entreaties of one who was known, through all changes, to befriend his party; although he had despised those which she herself had pressed upon him; nay, had even refused all assistance at her hands; for it needed but a moment's thought to enable her to solve the mystery of the gold that Taquine had found beneath the tree. She knew it was the same which she had forced upon the young man as a recompense for his opportune aid: he had disdained to accept it; she resolved, nevertheless, that this should not deter her from rendering him every assistance in her power.

It was yet early, but Jacqueline rose with

the sun to drive her herd through the forest to the open plain, and must have returned to her solitary labour at the cottage. All was still and quiet as Estelle entered the nook in which her lowly dwelling was situated. It was a dark and lonely spot, whose solitude was seldom broken by the gaily-attired peasants of Avilly; for Jacqueline was a lone and melancholy woman, and one for whom the society of the tattling *commères* of the village possessed no charm. Even the solitary woodsman, whom chance might lead that way, would pause amid his labour, to pity poor Jacqueline, and wonder how she could ever make that isolated cottage her abode. But Jacqueline cared little for the good opinion of others; she sought no assistance; she asked no pity; she had been born and bred in the solitude of the forest, and pined not now for lack of company. During the course of a long life she had been attached to few, but these she had loved with that all-enduring affection which knows no

change. Such had been her love for the Countess d'Espignac, that when that kind mistress died, the heart of Jacqueline was buried in her grave; and still was Adhemar dearer than all beside upon earth. She had rejoiced in his prosperity; she had exulted in his glory; and now that he was exiled and unhappy, she too was wretched and desponding.

It was thus that Estelle had found her when she arrived at Avilly. Prejudice had at first rendered the old woman blind to the mild and winning manners of the beautiful heiress; but time and perseverance effect much; and she herself, who once thought that all save Adhemar were becoming hateful, would wonder why she felt such pleasure in gazing on the lovely features of Estelle, or why she took such delight in repeating to her the legends of her youth. She was surprised that she felt no dread that the lovely heiress of La Vallée would betray her, for her attachment to the name of d'Espignac; she would marvel why

the days seemed longer, and more dull, if she came not, while the hours flew so swiftly by when the blooming maiden was at her side. But Jacqueline was too old long to deceive herself; and she was soon sensible of the real truth, that Estelle de la Vallée now claimed a portion of that love which had hitherto been solely engrossed by Adhemar.

"I too am false," said she to herself one day, as she sighed to detect herself watching with eagerness the path by which Estelle usually arrived at the cottage; "I too am false! I love this damsel although her name be La Vallée, and her father has usurped the place of him whose ancestors have dwelt for ages honoured and beloved at Avilly. But she is gentle and affectionate, and none could choose but love her. Even as Mélanie d'Espignac, is she kind and tender-hearted; even like her, will she weep at the bare recital of sorrow, although the sufferer may have been an enemy."

It was thus that, beguiling herself with this

fancied resemblance, she had suffered the high-born Estelle to twine around her heart, and gradually to insinuate herself into her tenderest affections.

As she drew near to the cabin of the venerable forester, Estelle was somewhat surprised to remark that the door was closed, while no sign indicative of labour was yet observable. Perhaps it might be that she had never been in the habit of seeking Jacqueline at this early hour; but never before had she been so forcibly impressed with the deep solitude of the place, rendered more striking by the contrast which it afforded to the light and cheerfulness of the path which she had just quitted, where every thing teemed with the life and freshness of morning, where the dew-drops glittered on the trembling boughs in the sunbeams, and myriads of birds, awaking from their slumbers, made the thickets re-echo with their merry warblings. But here no sound greeted the ear, save the gentle

murmur of the brook, and the soft sighing of the wind amid the trees. It seemed as if all nature were still buried in repose, or that every thing possessing life had abandoned the spot, and sought the genial warmth of the more open glades.

At first she thought that Jacqueline was absent with the flock, and would soon return. But she was quickly undeceived; for scarcely had she tarried a moment in uncertainty whether to go or remain, when the lowing of a cow, proceeding from one of the tenements at the back of the cottage, struck her with surprise. It alarmed her, for she knew that nothing, except illness, could ever cause the old woman to neglect her charge. She advanced slowly, and with some trepidation: all was still silent; but a vein of blue smoke issuing from the chimney, proved that some one was stirring within. She laid her hand upon the latch, it was secured on the inside, and yielded not to her endeavours to raise it. Jacqueline, who had been

used to fly as soon as she heard the step of her youthful friend, now apparently heard it not, for the door still remained unopened, although Estelle could distinguish a busy whispering, as of voices engaged in earnest debate; and once, too, she fancied the low suppressed growl of a mastiff mingled its angry tones with those of the speakers.

She tapped gently, but started in dismay, for a loud and savage yell burst from the watchful animal within, who springing forward, scratched at the door in wild ungoverned fury. At the same moment the curtain which hung before the little casement, was drawn aside, and a face, but not that of Jacqueline, was perceptible for an instant amid the vine-leaves, as of one endeavouring to catch a glimpse of the intruder. The glance, all transient as it was, was apparently satisfactory, for when the gazer withdrew, the heavy clank of Jacqueline's *sabots* was heard approaching the door. It was quickly opened, and

the old woman herself, whose countenance beamed with delight, kindly bade her welcome. Estelle drew back, for the hound, although unnoticed by Jacqueline, still continued his loud and furious demonstrations of rage at sight of a stranger, and she had not courage to attempt to pass him.

" Silence, good Perceforêt," said a voice from within, " Peace! it is a friend!"

In an instant the obedient animal, although occasionally whining, as if not wholly pacified, retired from the door and laid down upon the hearth. And yet Estelle advanced not; she blushed and trembled, and still remained upon the threshold; for even in this short sentence she recognised the low, soft tones of the young hunter; the very same which had sunk so deeply into her heart on the evening before, and which she had since fancied would never be effaced from her memory.

" There is a stranger within," said she in a whisper to Jacqueline, " I will return anon;

my errand is of importance, 'tis concerning Adhemar d'Espignac, and must meet no ear but thine."

"Ah!" exclaimed the old woman, "Estelle de la Vallée is surely some guardian angel; it is Providence has sent you here,—I pray you depart not: the stranger within is a tried friend and companion in arms of the young Count; of all the world he is the most worthy to be informed of any thing concerning our own Adhemar."

She took Estelle by the hand as she spoke, and led her in, and it was not without some slight degree of embarrassment that the latter found herself again face to face with the hunter. He was seated on Jacqueline's low pallet, with his arm thrown negligently across the chair from which she had just risen. He started to his feet in evident surprise as Estelle entered, and, bowing coldly, took up his hat, and whistled to his dog, as if about to depart: but Jacqueline interposed: "Nay, nay," said

she, "this is not a time to take leave; thou must tarry awhile. This fair and kind lady is Mademoiselle de la Vallée, of whom thou wert just now questioning me so closely."

The youth appeared confused; he bit his lip and coloured deeply, at the same time glancing reproachfully at Jacqueline, who, however, totally unconscious of having said any thing amiss, continued, in a louder key, and with a significant look, "And, hearest thou, Julian? it is kindly interest in the fate of Adhemar which has brought her hither."

The youth raised his eyes in astonishment to Estelle; she, too, stood blushing and abashed, nor once dared to look up, fearing to meet his gaze. The colour which had tinged his cheek suddenly gave place to the most deadly paleness, and, to hide his agitation, he sprang forward with eager, busy politeness, to reach the low jointed stool which stood in the chimney corner, and was the only seat in the apartment, save the venerable *bergère* of the hostess. He placed it for Estelle, and again

sat down on the edge of the humble couch from which he had risen on her entrance.

There was a silence of a few moments, during which, apparently forgetful of all beside, Jacqueline leaned back in her chair to gaze on the stranger. A fond smile stole to her lip, as her eye wandered with intense delight over his manly features. But soon the smile vanished; she sighed deeply, and, turning hastily aside, as if recollection had suddenly returned, said to Estelle, "The name of this young cavalier is Julian l'Evêque; he is one of the earliest friends of Adhemar, and loves him as a brother. He has left the camp to seek Avilly, hoping that here at least he should obtain tidings of his comrade; but, alas! few are the followers of De Guise who dare venture on their own estates, except in disguise."

"Hush, good mother!" said the youth, gently laying his hand on the old woman's arm, "such allusions may seem uncourteous to Mademoiselle de la Vallée."

"Ha! I see thou knowest her not, Julian," she whispered; "in truth, how shouldst thou know all the love and tenderness that dwell within her generous soul! Is it not enough, unbeliever, that her errand even now concerns one whose name is d'Espignac?" Then again addressing Estelle, she continued, "Julian is quite a stranger here, Mademoiselle; it is but an hour ago that he arrived. He knows not Avilly yet, but he is a sportsman, and I have promised him such goodly sport in our forest, that I warrant me he will be in no hurry to depart."

Years had somewhat dimmed old Jacqueline's sight, or she could not have failed to observe the double embarrassment to which her remark had given rise. It was evident to Estelle, that although she had formed the subject of conversation before she entered,—and she could not help blushing at the thought,—the young man had kept her interview with him in the forest a profound secret. She herself told

it not; she would have deemed it the height of imprudence once to revert to it in his presence; and it was thus that a treacherous, involuntary confidence, even to the exclusion of their mutual friend, was established between them, which was of more effect in breaking through the barrier of reserve, behind which the youth had seemed resolved to entrench himself, than whole months of constant intercourse. He spoke not, but Estelle, with all a woman's quick perception, was sensible that her own continued silence had dispelled the frown which had at first gathered on his brow, and when next her eye met his, she could not mistake the beaming glance which he directed towards her. She was, however, soon interrupted in her musing by the cottager, whose heart seemed so full of Julian, that for once she appeared to have forgotten Estelle, and, what was yet more astonishing, the subject of her visit. "Yes, I trust thou wilt tarry with us long, Julian," she said, taking his hand, and again indulging in a long ardent

gaze of affection. She pointed to the hat and plumes which lay at his feet, and continued, "It is but doffing yonder badge of rebellion, as the Royalists falsely call the Ligueur's hat, albeit it has oftentimes covered heads far wiser than their own,—and for the rest there is little danger. In the hunter's garb all is safe at Avilly."

"Oh no! do not deceive him, good Jacqueline," interrupted Estelle, colouring with agitation, "do not deceive him. Avilly is not the place where, in any dress, a Ligueur may dwell in safety. Thinkest thou, when I came, at this early hour, to speak of the Count d'Espignac, that I came the messenger of welcome tidings? Alas! 'twas but to warn thee of his danger! If Monsieur l'Evêque be a true friend, he should rejoice that he has not found him. It is well he is thus concealed. Pray Heaven his enemies may meet with no better fortune! This have I to say: they are again upon his track, and will hunt him to

the death, if there be no one at hand to apprise him of his peril."

The dark eye of Julian flashed fire! He started; and as if by an involuntary motion snatched up the rifle which stood against the wall.

The brow of old Jacqueline was pale as marble. The words of Estelle seemed suddenly to have checked that exuberance of joy in which she had been indulging, and nothing but fear and agitation were now imprinted on her countenance. She clasped her hands, and turned to Julian.

"Fly!" she said, in tones of despair; "fly, my son. Even here there is no peace for thee. Tarry not, but depart, while yet there is a chance of safety."

"Nay, nay;" said Estelle, interposing; "it is not Monsieur l'Evêque who is in danger: I named not him, Jacqueline. It is the young Count Adhemar. Alas! if he were here, thou wouldst do well to bid him fly. His danger is

imminent, and might well alarm even a less fond heart than thine. Already have they resolved to search through glade and glen round Avilly, still hoping to discover him. He has many and bitter foes; and right sure am I that he would not escape them long, were he to make this his abode."

Jacqueline again turned from Estelle to the hunter, who stood seemingly unmoved, but listening with profound attention.

"Wilt thou hear this, and linger yet?" she said, in a tone of intense feeling; "go forth, again, my son! Seek safety where thou hast ever found it, amid the turmoil and dangers of the camp. Alas! alas! we have met but for a moment, and hope shone bright the while; we must now part in sorrow, and perchance for ever! Years have fallen heavily on my withered frame since last I saw thee, standing at my knee a blooming boy. Thou hast returned, in the flower and the pride of thy youth; while I alas! am hurrying to the

grave: and when thou comest again, thou wilt find a stranger sitting at my hearth. But go, my son! the sight of thee, even for so short a space, has caused my old heart to throb as once 'twas wont, ere joy became a stranger to it; and now, I shall die content!"

She bent her head low on her bosom as she concluded, and the tears fell thick and fast upon her uplifted hands. Estelle sobbed, she knew not why; and the hunter gazed at his aged friend in mingled love and admiration. He spoke not, he shed no tear, but he hastily flung back the dark locks from his pallid brow, and turned aside, as if not daring to take another glance. He trembled with agitation, and when he moved, on the spot where he had stood, the brittle tiles of the cottage floor had crumbled beneath his iron-bound heel!

But Jacqueline soon recovered her composure; for in old age, as in early youth, violent emotions are but of short duration. She dried her tears, and arose.

"We must not waste the precious moments in idle grief," she said. "Thou must depart, and instantly. Avilly is not, as it once was, a refuge for the weary and persecuted; it is no resting-place for thee, and thou must quit it without delay."

"Never!" said the stranger in a firm voice, as the colour again mounted to his cheek, and his eye rekindled, bright and glittering as before; "I leave this place no more! Through perils and dangers, through whole hosts of enemies, and in disguise, have I sought it; and here will I remain till my destiny be accomplished! Here, if it so please Heaven, will I meet my fate. But mark you, not without a struggle, ay, desperate and deadly! Like the boar which, when hunted to his last refuge, can yet turn upon his enemies: so, if I fall, I will not fall unrevenged!"

A dark cloud passed over his countenance as he significantly touched the trigger of his rifle. It clicked beneath the pressure of his finger,

and, roused by the sound he so well knew, old Perceforêt rose growling from the hearth, and ran towards his master. But the hunter appeared not to notice the faithful animal, although he whined fondly, and jumped up to lick his hand. Jacqueline, too, was silent, apparently lost in astonishment at the young man's determination; but Estelle, still unable to account for this total forgetfulness of Adhemar, ventured to affirm that it was Adhemar alone who had reason to be alarmed; he alone had enemies; but that Monsieur l'Evêque would do well to depart, as no Ligueur would now be safe in the forest, for any must find it difficult to elude the vigilance of the spies sent in quest of the young Count.

Her words seemed again to arouse the youth's attention, and, for the first time during this interview, he addressed her. "You are kind, Mademoiselle," said he bitterly, "passing kind thus to take an interest in the fate of Adhemar. Where enemies are many, friends are few;

and he owes you many thanks for such generous exertion to turn aside his evil destiny. But it must not be—he must meet it like a man, whatever it be. Adhemar is the last of his race; with him the name of d'Espignac sinks into oblivion, and he must not be found wanting in that bold daring by which his ancestors raised and maintained it so long among the highest of the land. Neither will he perish and leave no record of his death. He has long been seeking renown in fighting the battles of others; here will he make his last stand, and fight his own."

He stamped his foot vehemently, while his lip quivered, and his brow grew darker.

"Oh, say not so!" exclaimed Estelle, in evident distress; "I pray you say not *here*. You know not his danger. He has an enemy, so terrible, that—"

"He has, he has—I know it well," interrupted the hunter, tossing his arm as if in defiance, while an expression of mingled scorn and

fierce defiance overspread his features; "and perhaps," he continued, with a bitter sneer, "you can tell me, Mademoiselle, who is that enemy?"

Estelle was unprepared for the question;—it went to her very soul. "It matters not," she replied, with something of pride in her manner, although her voice faltered,—"it matters not; in truth I — I scarce knew myself of whom I meant to speak; but it is already suspected that Jacqueline is acquainted with his retreat; and knowing the love she has ever borne him, I came but for his sake, that, if he were really here, she might warn him betimes of the sore peril in which he would stand should he be seen near the chateau—near—near Chantilly, I should have said—as the Court is coming quickly; and—and he cannot fail to have some enemy among the train of knights and nobles by which the King and Henry of Navarre will be accompanied."

Estelle was yet but a novice in the art of

dissembling, and her painful embarassment was so visible that it created something like a feeling of regret in the bosom of Julian, as his conscience whispered that he had been guilty of injustice and ingratitude. He would willingly now have made amends, but in his turn he was confused, and sought in vain to remove the maiden's evident agitation. Jacqueline fortunately at that moment came to his assistance. "You are right, sweet lady," she said; "Adhemar cannot fail to have bitter enemies at Court; his old comrades, and even Guillaume Rose, who has ever been to him as a father, have now all turned against him! You say truly, he has indeed no friends—he is the outcast of all parties;— all are now become his enemies."

But, while the old woman had been speaking, the momentary awe had passed away from Estelle's mind, and she scorned further subterfuge. Her meek spirit rose at the thought of the fierce sarcastic tone in which the hunter had

addressed her. She felt indignant with herself that she should have been betrayed into the slightest demonstration of fear at his haughty manner. She turned at once to Jacqueline, nor took further notice of her companion. She could not but perceive that the latter was acquainted with the situation in which her father stood with regard to Adhemar, and was resolved he should not imagine that she had been intimidated by his frown. How little was she aware, when she spoke, that it was her father's pride which caused her azure eye to flash, and the roseate tint of her soft cheek to deepen.

" You are deceived, dear Jacqueline," said she, proudly and deliberately, that the youth might hear with distinctness each word that fell from her lips. " Thou hast a mother's love for the young Count, and it is not fitting thou shouldst be kept in ignorance of any thing concerning him. Know then, that let the Court be where it may, his danger is still

the same at Avilly. His enemy will ever be nigh at hand; and that enemy is, the Count de la Vallée, my father!"

She paused, but neither of her hearers ventured to utter a word. Jacqueline could but listen in astonishment, while the face of the young stranger reddened to scarlet; but she appeared not to heed him, and continued hastily—

"Now blame me not if evil should betide him. I have said, perhaps, more than may seem prudent; but thou, Jacqueline, hast oftentimes told me, that Providence has many ways of raising up friends to the injured and persecuted; and even now, thou seest Estelle de la Vallée eager to rescue from ruin Adhemar d'Espignac."

She turned as she concluded, and cast, perhaps, an involuntary glance at the hunter. He appeared deeply absorbed in thought, for he stood leaning against the low breastwork of the chimney, his head bent low, as if gazing upon

the dying embers on the hearth. The maiden's courage was failing fast. She feared, lest by remaining longer, it would abandon her altogether, and, therefore, hurriedly bidding farewell to Jacqueline, she prepared to depart. The noise of her footsteps seemed to startle the youth from his reverie, and he hastily pressed forward to open the door. Estelle raised her eyes to thank him. For an instant her glance met his. She started at the altered expression of his countenance. The fire which had so lately flashed from his proud dark eye was quenched, and a tear was seen to glisten beneath the jetty lashes; but the next moment he dashed it indignantly away, and when the receding form of the lovely maiden was lost to sight, he turned again to Jacqueline, calm and composed as before.

The next day Estelle again sought the cottage by her father's desire; and the next, and the next. Still were the hunter and his dog found by old Jacqueline's side. Day after day

she left her proud home and hurried to the lonely cabin of the *vachère*, until at length she sought it in gladness, and left it with regret. Jacqueline no longer tarried alone to watch her coming. She was no longer the only one who welcomed her with joy and — But why detail what the reader must have anticipated ere this? Long, long before the forest had yielded the vernal tints of spring to the golden hues of summer, Estelle de la Vallée loved the dark-eyed stranger.

## CHAPTER III.

"Love in the tempest most alive,
Hath ever held that pearl the best
He finds beneath the stormiest water."

MOORE.

MORE than three months now elapsed in this manner, each succeeding hour bringing increase of hope and happiness to Estelle. The Count de la Vallée had been summoned to the Court, to aid by his counsels the crafty advisers of Henry de Valois, who were fully prepared to take every advantage of the open, unsuspecting nature of the young King of Navarre, ere he ventured to conclude the treaty.

In taking leave of his daughter, the Count had strictly charged her not to omit her daily

visit to the cottage, exhorting her to patience, and encouraging her to hope that, ere long, the discovery of Adhemar's retreat would reward their perseverance.

It is needless to say that his commands were obeyed; and it was thus that whole days were spent in that calm deceitful intercourse, in which love has so often glided into the youthful bosom unknown and unawares. Power, greatness, La Vallée, De Montbel, all were alike forgotten by Estelle, as seated at old Jacqueline's hearth, she listened to the stirring details of the battles and deadly strife, the proud triumphs and sad reverses of the Ligue, which the hunter would relate for her amusement, nor once fancied that love for the narrator mingled with the interest which she felt in the recital.

It was, perhaps, well for his cause, that all this time Julian breathed not one word, nor looked one glance of love. It might have alarmed the timid maiden, and have caused her to examine betimes into her own feelings. But no, still

reserved in his manner, he suffered no sign to escape him, to betray the struggle which was already beginning to tear his proud heart asunder. Unlike Estelle, he had not deceived himself for an instant. He well knew what power had quelled the fierceness of his tone when he now addressed her, so unlike what he had at first assumed. Young as he was, he possessed much of that stern unyielding pride which taught him to scorn disguise, even with himself; and it was not long before he began to reflect, sometimes with a smile, at others with a sigh, that, had he met Estelle amid the gaieties of the Court, her beauty and innocence would have extorted admiration, and perhaps nothing more; but he had met her in the lonely solitude of the forest —he had heard her soft voice falter—he had seen her blue eye glisten at the mention of Adhemar! and, with a gush of tenderness and gratitude, an overflow of those gentler feelings which had so long lain dormant in his bosom, he owned to himself that he loved her.

It was thus that the time passed away until the Count's return. Julian did not trust himself to look beyond the present: the future was to him a dreary void. In his more gloomy moments, he would fancy that Estelle had been sent, like some beauteous but evil spirit, to hurry him more quickly to despair. It needed but the pangs of hopeless love to fill up the measure of his darkening destiny. Even these had not been withheld, even these he had found at last, when he fondly thought that all the golden dreams of youth and hope had long passed away, and given place to sterner thoughts—retribution and revenge! And yet there were times, when the day had declined, and Estelle had departed, that, alone with Jacqueline, he would unburthen to her all his sorrows, purposely to hear, again and again, those consolations with which she endeavoured to soothe him, and with which he was never wearied. She encouraged him to hope—she bade him not despair: she told him that the ways of Providence were inscrutable; that

there might be the very happiness in store for him which he had so long despised; and Julian was young, and such is the buoyant nature of the youthful heart, however seared and blighted, that even he, homeless and friendless, a wanderer and an outlaw, would suffer hope again to visit his bosom, and cheat him with fond illusions. But the next moment, indignant to be thus beguiled, the idle dream was chased away, and again, brooding over his wrongs, again would he swear to live but for revenge!

The Court had already been some time expected at Chantilly, and all were deeply engaged in extensive preparations for the reception of the King. Estelle had long ago, meekly and distantly, hinted to the hunter the danger in which he placed himself by remaining thus near the palace; but he had smiled at her fears, and she urged him no farther. The name of Adhemar was breathed no more. She remembered, with fear and trembling, the darkening frown of Julian, and would not for worlds have called it forth again; and thus,

as if by mutual consent, he seemed to be forgotten by all.

One warm and sunny afternoon the little trio were seated in the garden at the back of Jacqueline's cottage. Estelle and the hunter had, as if unconsciously, taken their station side by side beneath the shade of a spreading hawthorn, whose blossoms, moved by each breath of a gentle wind, fell in showers over their heads, scattering rich perfume around; while Jacqueline, busy at her wheel, sat enjoying the genial warmth of the sunbeams at some little distance.

The day had been one of tumultuous delight to Estelle; for Julian had appeared, for once, to have laid aside his habitual melancholy, conversing with more freedom, and upon gayer topics than usual. His stories, which had ever been of the stormy battle and wary ambush, now turned upon the fun and frolic of the Court —the scenes of mirth which he had witnessed when page to the Duke de Guise—the mis-

chievous pranks and well-laid stratagems to escape detection, by which himself and his boyish associates had disarmed the anger and overturned the gravity of the wisest greybeards. The light heart of Estelle rebounded with joy, and now and then the soft deep tones of the speaker were interrupted by her bursts of innocent merriment; and although he scarcely smiled himself, yet she laughed the more, because it evidently gave him pleasure to see her happy.

Lulled by the warmth and the stillness, Jacqueline had dropped into a gentle slumber; and, as if fearing to disturb her repose, the voice of Julian had gradually sunk to a whisper.

"How calm and quiet is the forest," said he after maintaining silence for a few moments; and seeming to enjoy the scene, he paused to watch the gambols of Perceforêt, who was chasing in wild glee any stray bird or butterfly that chanced to light amid the flowers. "And yet," he continued, more thoughtfully,

with a slight return of that bitterness with which he always spoke, "even here, as in crowded cities, there can dwell injustice and oppression. Ay — and crushed spirits and broken hearts too — even they are not excluded."

"Nay, Monsieur l'Evêque, are we not somewhat too near Chantilly to expect it otherwise?" said Estelle. "But—" and she hesitated, "there are yet many parts of the wood where injustice has not yet penetrated, and where a broken heart may still find rest from its sufferings."

She paused, and looked anxiously in his countenance, in fear of his frown. But no, none was there. The glance was kind which he directed towards her, and she added more earnestly, "Now, is it prudent for one who loves De Guise, to make his home thus near Chantilly?"

She pointed to the cottage, and said no more. But the hunter appeared to take her warn-

ing kindly: "Think you I would involve my aged friend, Jacqueline, in the ruin that till lately I had cause to think must of a certainty be mine? No; yonder cottage is not my abode, Mademoiselle; it is deep amid the dark shades of the forest. Fear not—I know each path of these solitary woods, and my retreat has been well chosen."

"Ah, then! how falsely did Jacqueline speak, when she said you were a stranger at Avilly," said Estelle, smiling so bewitchingly as she spoke, that Julian was fain to turn aside, fearing to betray his feelings.

"We must forgive the pious fraud," he returned; "she knew I was a Ligueur, and moreover stood in greater danger than any besides; for it was not the Ligue I loved, but De Guise; and when he died, I flew to——But I wander—Jacqueline knew my peril, and little dreaming that it was to Mademoiselle de la Vallée herself she owed my visit, she deemed her little subterfuge the very masterpiece of policy.

I had not told—in short, I had not time to tell, whose kindly information led me to her cottage; for verily, had you not said she yet remembered Adhémar, I might have hesitated But now I love this humble cabin as though it were indeed my home. I leave it not till nightfall, and return with renewed delight at dawn, because — because" — he appeared confused. The heart of the maiden beat wildly; she trembled violently, she knew not wherefore, and awaited eagerly, between hope and fear, the conclusion of his sentence. But he spoke not again till he had recovered composure; and almost indignant with himself, he shook off the momentary weakness, and continued hastily, " Because Jacqueline is the only friend left to Adhémar here on his own estate, where all had once been friends and followers, and because she alone remembers him with love, when all else have forgotten him !"

He paused, and as if to cover his agitation, he had drawn down a bough of the hawthorn

beneath which they were seated, and while assiduously plucking the fragrant blossoms, he resumed.

"But now, thank Heaven! hope has dawned at last; and yet it cheers not now my heart as it once did. It comes ere yet the remembrance of long-continued grief has passed away; and like its emblem, this silvery flower, which, when once nipped by the chill north breeze, the sun has no longer power to revive; so is hope for ever chilled and crushed in the bosom by the swift return of adversity."

His brow was saddened, and Estelle began to fear that he would at length abandon himself to his habitual melancholy; when suddenly the branch which he had been holding flew back with an elastic rebound, leaving a whole cluster of the flowers in his hand. He turned again to Estelle, and resumed with a kind of reckless gaiety, "And yet, in spite of all this, who has not clung to hope, though oft and oft deceived? Who loves not the flower-

ing hawthorn, although its beauties fall with each passing gale? For me, I come of a race of greenwood foresters, and its snowy blossoms have ever been my badge! Amid the splendours of De Guise's court I gazed on it, and sighed for my peaceful home in the shady forest; and, in the raging battle, could my arm ever fail while the hawthorn bloomed around my beaver? But here," and a wan smile lighted up his features, "here it was misapplied. Emblem as it is of youth, and hope, and happiness, it should adorn the brows of those alone who still can hope — the young, the happy."

As he finished speaking, he had placed, as if unconsciously, a sprig of the hawthorn on the golden hair of Estelle, and heedless of her embarrassment, gazed with a kind of melancholy pleasure on her lovely countenance.

It was the first time that Julian had been beguiled into the slightest gallantry towards his beauteous companion. She felt secretly de-

lighted; and yet, with strange waywardness, her hand was raised to tear away the flower, but an exclamation from Jacqueline caused her to turn.

"Reject it not," cried the old woman; "oh, reject it not, Estelle de la Vallée! Holy Virgin! it cannot but bode good! It was thus I just now beheld you in my dream, little did I think to find it realized on waking." She looked significantly at Julian. "Only think, my son, how fancy can wander: in my sleep I was kneeling in the Chapel down in the wood; many fair ladies were there, and Mademoiselle de la Vallée in the midst, clad in robes of spotless white; it was something like a bridal. And they offered her a splendid coronet of gold and precious stones; and I saw her—ah! thou mayest well smile, Julian—I tell thee, I saw her cast it to the earth, and drawing forth a simple garland of our forest hawthorn, she placed it in triumph on her brow."

Julian started, nor appeared less confused

than the blushing maiden beside him. But Jacqueline continued, as she looked admiringly at Estelle,

"Ah, Julian, does she not remind thee of the Woodland Queen, on St. Hubert's day? Those were indeed merry times, in the days of the old family, when the hunters chose the fairest lass, and bore her, crowned with flowers, down to the *rendezvous de chasse;* the bugles sounding all the while so cheerily the fierce challenge, the proud war-note, or the merry hunting call of the d'Espignacs. Ah, would I could hear it now! it would recall those happy times, even were it for an instant. Breathe it but once, Julian, here is my *cornemuse;* time was, when it was sounded from a somewhat nobler instrument."

"And why not now? and why not now, I pray, good mother?" exclaimed the hunter, suddenly starting to his feet, and drawing from beneath his hunting-frock a small gilt bugle, which till then had been concealed. "By my

father's soul! it shall be heard once more at Avilly, if I die for sounding it!" he continued fiercely. "Perchance it will be for the last time, and by the spotless crest of the d'Espignacs, it shall not be from the herds-woman's cowhorn!"

The words of Jacqueline seemed to have recalled all those recollections which never failed to rouse him to fury. Placing the instrument to his lips, he stood proudly erect, and blew with all his might a wild tremendous blast, which echoed far and wide through the silent glens of the forest.

Estelle was almost terrified at the scene; the glance of fierce defiance which shot from the eye of the hunter, so glittering and deathly dark, together with the wildness of his look, as, throwing his head back, the long raven hair fell over his shoulders, inspired her with awe. Jacqueline, too, seemed alarmed at the frenzy which she had herself excited.

"Hush, my son!" said she softly, "or thou

wilt be heard; and thou knowest not the issue should that sound reach the village."

"What! canst thou fear, Jacqueline, it would rouse the faithless foresters? Be not alarmed, their souls have long ago been dead to honour and d'Espignac; they have forgotten him and taken other oaths: they——"

"But, dear Julian," said she soothingly, and apparently much distressed, "thou knowest well such sounds have power to rouse from their graves those old retainers who followed the d'Espignac to battle. Behold, even Perce-forêt knows well what means that challenge!"

She pointed to the hound. He was standing near the hedge, his head extended, and his tail erect, as if about to spring forward, while, as he scented the air, a savage growl burst from his broad chest, and his eyes glared with fury!

"He is a faithful fool!" said the hunter, in a faltering voice; "a fond and faithful fool! His is the only heart save mine that can now thus throb with eagerness at d'Espignac's sum-

mons. But, alas! thou saidst aright; such proud defiance is most unmeet; and yet they of that fallen house knew not a softer note, save alone the last sad requiem which was ever breathed when one of that long line of forest chieftains was borne to his last resting-place. But that were better suited to their sunken fortunes, and ye shall hear it: it will never more be sounded; there is left but one of that mighty name, and none are living who would breathe it over his grave!"

He again placed the bugle to his lips and blew a few notes, so low and mournful that Jacqueline melted into tears, and Estelle gazed in mute amazement on his countenance. To the fiery flush of indignation, had succeeded a death-like paleness, while, as the solemn tones gushed forth, a cold shudder ran through his frame, as though each note thrilled to his very soul, and brought mournful recollections of the past.

But this forgetfulness was not of long dura-

tion, for while yet the melancholy sound trembled on the breeze, long ere its echo had died away, the hunter had started from his reverie; the hand which held the bugle had fallen powerless to his side, and he stood looking wildly around, as the sound of a huntsman's horn, the very answer to his own sad strain, was borne from the bosom of the forest, and floated slowly on the noontide air, as though the very woods responded to the dirge of their fallen masters!

The hunter stood immovable for a moment, as if in doubt whether it might not be indeed the woodland echoes, and fearful of destroying the charm; but, even while he paused, it was again repeated louder and more near; and now the tread of a steed, slow and cautious, as if its rider were unacquainted with the mazy path, was distinctly heard approaching the cottage.

"Holy Mother of Grace! we are lost, we are lost!" exclaimed Jacqueline, as she rose with terror in her looks. "Julian, thy imprudence has betrayed thee!"

But Julian moved not from the spot where he had stood; his eye was riveted upon the hedge where the faithful hound had so long betrayed his consciousness of the approach of a stranger, and he withdrew not his gaze even while she spoke thus earnestly. Estelle, too, looked with breathless dread in the same direction; for above the little palisade of the garden, which was raised high to protect Jacqueline's stock of poultry from the attack of the prowling fox, was seen a warrior's milk-white plume, which danced and nodded gaily as its wearer advanced steadily up the path, seemingly heedless of the loud baying of the hound, and carelessly whistling as he rode along.

It was a moment of awful suspense to all, when the stranger had turned the angle of the projecting wall of the cottage, and the tramp of his steed was heard no more. But yet the hunter moved not; he listened with painful eagerness during the momentary silence which followed. The transient hope to which this

pause had given rise, that the stranger's visit was not destined to the cabin, was, however, but too soon dispelled by a heavy knock on the outer door. Estelle and Jacqueline both turned with one accord to Julian; neither had power to speak, but each looked imploringly in his face, as though still urging his flight: still he appeared unconscious of their anxiety in his fate; his countenance changed not; he spoke in a low, compressed tone, and to himself alone were his words uttered.

"The hour is come at last," he murmured calmly, as he thrust the bugle, whose silvery tones had thus betrayed him, back to its hiding-place; "he has tracked me to my last covert; but it is somewhat luckless for his bloodhound thus to come, while the challenge of the d'Espignac is yet ringing in my ears!"

Another knock, louder and more peremptory than before, was now heard. Jacqueline wrung her hands, in an agony of terror; as without moving a muscle of his features, the young hunter advanced to seize the rifle which

stood against the tree, beneath which he had been seated.

"Fly!" said she, placing herself before him, and speaking in quick, hurried tones, as though she knew he would seek to interrupt her; "begone, my son!—thou wilt leap yonder hedge, 'twill be no hard task for thee then to ford the brook. Thou wilt have time; I will not admit him till thou art safe; the staple is up at the front door, and he cannot enter;—and, ha ha! thou wilt baffle thy pursuers even once more! The wood is thick and tangled—'twill afford thee safe refuge for awhile, till——"

"Say no more, good mother!" exclaimed Julian, somewhat angrily, unable longer to endure her well-meant importunity. "Thou hast surely forgotten the name I bear, thus to urge a cowardly retreat, while the means are yet within my power to avenge my wrongs! Who tells thee I must fly? Thou canst have, in truth, but small reliance on my arm, to deem that it would fail!"

He sprang forward, and seizing the rifle in

his nervous grasp, brandished it aloft, as if in triumph. At that moment, the knocking was again heard, accompanied by a summons for admittance not to be disregarded.

"Let them come," said he, drawing himself proudly up; "the danger is theirs, and not mine, while my right arm has power to wield my rifle!"

He shouldered the weapon as he spoke, and placed himself before the open door, opposite to that at which the stranger was battering with redoubled vigour. Scarcely had he thus taken his stand, when a loud shriek burst from Jacqueline, as the worm-eaten staple, unused to such rude attacks, snapped asunder, and fell rattling to the floor! Julian threw his foot firmly forward and stood in the attitude of taking aim: the heart of Estelle de la Vallée almost ceased to beat; but Jacqueline stepped before him, and stood upon the threshold.

"Begone!" said she, dropping the tone of humble supplication, which she had hitherto

assumed, and suddenly adopting that of stern authority. "Begone!" she continued, stamping her foot: "cross not this threshold, as thou valuest our Lady's blessing. Go! thou art young, and a warrior, yet hast not the foresight that I can boast, who am old and a woman, or thou wouldst have known that he who wears the glittering casque and dancing plume comes not thus alone to meet this danger. Thinkest thou he has not others at command to fight, and slay,—ay, and die for him, if they be so required! Go, rash boy! nor suffer thy heart's best blood to deluge my peaceful hearth in a vain, inglorious encounter. Ungrateful and unfeeling! is it thus thou wouldst fulfil thy pledge to Henry of Navarre, the generous friend who has already——"

She finished not her sentence, for the latch was already raised beneath the stranger's touch, and nothing was now left to impede his entrance.

With scorn imprinted on his lip and fire in

his eye, Julian still endeavoured to advance, in spite of her remonstrances. There was not another moment to be lost. She seized the heavy door, and swung it with a violent effort; quick as lightning it closed with a loud report, leaving him on the outside! The iron bolt within was drawn instantly, and thus any further effort on his part to obtain admittance was rendered wholly useless. Rage and disappointment took possession of his soul. His teeth were clenched, his bosom heaved convulsively, as still maintaining his threatening attitude, he stood before the closed door, as though he yet expected his pursuer to appear. But when the murmur of voices was heard from within, and no sound indicative of the hostile intentions of the intruder could be distinguished, this overpowering swell of fiery wrath began somewhat to abate. Nature had made him dauntless and haughty; oppression had rendered him fierce and unforgiving; the excitement of the moment had roused all the

stormy passions of his fearless soul; but neither injustice nor ingratitude could be laid to his charge; and even now, when his brain had cooled, reason and recollection were not slow to return, and he was soon seen to drop the rifle. His next movement was to sling it at his back, and turn from the cottage to seek safety by the means which Jacqueline had pointed out. He scrambled the high hedge, and gained the summit in a moment.

"Jacqueline is kind," he murmured; "she has counselled me in kindness. Did I not plight my faith to Henry of Navarre to remain concealed? Would not my rash imprudence have ruined the just, the holy cause? and, worse than all, have brought destruction on poor Jacqueline? But never again will I place her thus in jeopardy for my sake. Ho! Perceforêt, to thy master's side, and let us to the woods once more!"

The faithful animal flew to his side, in obedience to the summons; and light and

agile as the squirrel, the hunter leaped the hedge, and, aided in his descent by the shrubs which grew from the side of the sandy bank, alighted in another moment on the greensward beneath.

"I shall return but to say farewell," said he, as he tarried while the hound, panting with eagerness, scrambled amid the brambles; "there is a curse upon my head—my presence brings woe and misery wherever I appear. I have sought Jacqueline but to disturb the peaceful calm of her declining days, like the dark and stormy thundercloud at set of sun. But she shall not share the curse which ever follows me; I will fly once more to the bosom of the forest, and forget the few, fond moments of brief joy, which have been mine beneath her humble roof; and all—ay, all, all—save alone the love and kindness which she has ever shown me!"

He turned hastily away towards the brook; one foot was already in its limpid stream,

when a faint cry met his ear from above. He started, and raised his eyes, and, with astonishment, beheld the lovely, the highborn Estelle de la Vallée, forgotten amid all the strife and danger, now standing on the high bank, holding in her hand the hat and waving plumes which had lain neglected beneath the thorn where they had so lately sat together. Her brow and cheek were pale as the snowy flowers which he had himself entwined amid her golden tresses, and which still bloomed there, as if to reproach him with even that momentary forgetfulness of his wrongs and sorrows. He drew near. She flung the hat down upon the grass; "Fly, Monsieur l'Evêque! fly!" said she, in breathless accents; "see you it is the Ligueur's badge, and would betray where you had been!"

She said no more, and before he had time to breathe his thanks, she had disappeared. But this was enough—the farewell look, the faltering tones, the harrowing anxiety depicted

in her countenance, were more than enough to unfold a tale of wonder and delight to the bosom of Julian. They brought an unaccountable sensation of mingled pain and pleasure; and when, at length, he turned from the spot, his heart beat tumultuously; but not with coward fear, nor eagerness to fly—it could not be these—for neither had ever before possessed the power to awaken a single throb. He fled, with that last look engraven on his heart; he bore it with him to the silence and solitude whither he was hurrying; and through long hours of loneliness and gloom, like a ray of holy light, the memory of that moment served to revive his desponding spirit, and cheer him with hopes of better days.

And Estelle, too, still agitated and perplexed, descended to wait for Jacqueline, her mind filled with the thought of Julian; and forgetting all the terror she had suffered for his sake, in the joy that he had at length escaped the danger.

It was not long before the old woman appeared. She had got rid of the stranger, without noise or trouble; and yet, nothing but alarm was visible in her countenance, and her cheek was moist with tears. Her first thought was of Julian. She crossed the garden hastily, and flew to the spot whence he had descended.

"Is he gone?" said she, looking anxiously around. "Did he fly in safety, Mademoiselle de la Vallée? Think you, he can escape pursuit? Is it certain he does not linger near, to rush on death with fatal rashness?"

To all these questions, which were uttered in a breath, Estelle endeavoured to soothe her agitation by the assurance of Julian's escape in perfect safety.

"The Virgin's blessing be upon his head!" said Jacqueline, looking fondly towards the path he had taken, "and bear him, scathless, through the toils and snares which have been spread for his destruction!"

"And was it then an enemy?" said Estelle.

"Can he be any other than an enemy who seeks my cottage?" returned the old woman bitterly. "He essayed to beguile with crafty speech, but he could not disguise the errand upon which he came. He asked me if I knew any thing of Adhémar; and with a smile, too! It was well the gallant hunter stood not nigh at hand; he would have felled the hypocrite to the earth! But I wavered not. I was not to be deceived by all the smooth words of the cunning foe; and—and—besides, could I tell any thing of Adhémar, who know not where he has taken refuge, even though I had closed my hand upon the gold which the stranger offered?"

A loud and startling laugh was heard just as she uttered these words; it proceeded from the stranger himself, who, standing in his stirrups, was enabled to look over the palisade. His face was almost close to that of the affrighted Estelle. She could read every line of his features, as, motionless with terror, she stood

rooted to the spot, nor shrank from his admiring glance. Jacqueline appeared to feel no alarm, so great was her delight that Julian had escaped; she rather smiled in exultation that the stranger had overheard her speech; but the Knight was evidently too courteous to intrude long. After seeming to enjoy their surprise for a moment, he again indulged in another hearty laugh, and addressing Jacqueline with merry raillery, exclaimed—"*Vive Dieu!* reverend mother, thy daughter is fair as the day! Thou wert right, forsooth, to heighten the garden fence, to keep out the hungry wolf. Ah! and what do I behold? crowned with the hawthorn, too!—ha! ha! 'Tis well;"—imitating the tone in which the old woman spoke —"the bank has been raised high on the other side, likewise, to resist the waters of the brook when in winter they overflow."

Thus saying, he galloped gaily off, leaving Estelle in a state of agitation almost indescribable; while Jacqueline, although heedless of

the stranger's presence, seemed to shrink as the light laugh was echoed back upon her ear. She was silent, till the sound of the retreating steed had died away, and then she turned to Estelle: —"He has spoken my very words, sweet maiden!" said she. "I told him it was my daughter's voice that he had heard; and when he asked me who had breathed the death-note of the d'Espignacs, I told him that I heard it not. He is a stranger amid these woods, and easily beguiled, and thought he had not rightly traced the sound. But see, suspicion did not forsake him, or he would not thus have sought to look over the fence. I did not wish him to have beheld thee, dear Estelle, for he is on his way to the chateau!" Estelle started and grew pale, but Jacqueline proceeded—"It is better thou shouldest hasten homeward, and endeavour to arrive before him. He saw thee but for an instant, and may not remember thee."

Estelle thought well of Jacqueline's advice,

and resolved to follow it by departing instantly from the cottage; she paused not to take a lengthened farewell, fearful that the stranger might reach the chateau ere she herself should arrive there.

It would, perhaps, argue a superstitious fancy, when the alarm and agitation of the last few hours are considered, to say that she felt a strange and melancholy foreboding when she had thus taken leave of the kind old peasant, almost amounting to a belief that she should never behold her more. She stood upon the little hand-bridge, thrown across the gushing brook, and turned to take another look at the peaceful cottage, where so many hours of unconscious joy had of late been passed. She leaned pensively upon the rail, while memory traced all those strange emotions, hitherto forgotten amid the dreamy visions of happiness in which she had indulged. The guilty errand upon which at first she had been sent; her father's frantic wrath and heartless ambition;

his cold hate of the very man to whom she was to be united, and whom he had feigned to love beyond every thing on earth; all returned with overwhelming power to her soul. And then did her thoughts dive deep into her own heart, and bring many hidden sentiments to light of whose existence she had not dreamed. The indignation, the desire of revenge, which had hurried her in seeming eagerness to fulfil her mission; her heartfelt anxiety in the fate of the hunter Julian; his wild and dauntless bearing; the bold energy of his thoughts and language; and, above all, that shade of bitter melancholy, which never fails to excite the warmest sympathy in the youthful bosom. She dwelt on all these particulars, till the dread lest he should fall into the hands of those who were in such close pursuit of Count Adhemar, filled her with dismay. There was a mystery, too, about the youth, which served to heighten this tender interest. He had been persecuted by the King for his love to De

Guise, and even now, that De Guise was no more, these persecutions had not ceased! He must then have been of some importance to be thus hated by the monarch, when the cause of that hate no longer existed. He was known to Henry of Navarre; for Jacqueline had hinted that, in that Prince, he had found a steady friend; while his almost unearthly devotion to the very name of d'Espignac, when it was thus lowered with the dust, plainly denoted that he had once sided with that unhappy family. Then, alas! came the harrowing reflection, that her own father would join heart and hand in hot pursuit of any who still possessed affection for that outlawed race; and she could not deceive herself, as once she had done, with the fond thought of his generous mercy. She now knew his cold unyielding character. The spirit of Julian was fierce and untamed; her heart swelled to think of all he might yet have to suffer, already chased down and hunted to desperation by unrelenting ene-

mies, until, overcome by grief and fearful forebodings, her head sank on the rustic balustrade, and she burst into a flood of tears.

"Why weep you, maiden?" said a voice immediately behind her: she started; it was that of Jacqueline. By one of those strange sympathies which can often startle timid minds into a belief in supernatural forewarnings, she had followed Estelle, to say farewell once more, as though she too feared it would be long ere they met again.

She gently took the snow-white hand of the damsel, and looked wistfully in her face: she fancied she could read the cause of sorrow in her eyes, and her own filled with tears. The garland of hawthorn, which Julian had, in playfulness, wreathed among the maiden's hair, just then arrested the attention of her aged companion.

"Holy Maria! it is well I came thus soon, ere yet thou wert lost to sight," she exclaimed, taking the flowers from amid the glossy curls,

where they were softly reposing; "it would tell more tales than even the Ligueur's hat."

Estelle felt uneasy; she would have been delighted to take them from her hand, but dared not, lest it might be thought they were valued for the giver's sake.

But the old woman appeared absorbed in thought. She leaned against the rail and gazed on Estelle with that long, ardent gaze, which has power to imprint each feature vividly on the memory.

"Fare thee well, sweet Estelle de la Vallée!" she said, sighing deeply; "a warning whispers me that it will be long ere we meet again. Warriors are already galloping amid our quiet woods, and the Court is coming to the palace. Gay companions, and, alas! what will now seem new to thee, happy ones will flock to thy side, and replace those to whom thy presence has brought the only joy which they have known this many a-day. Again did she relapse into an attitude of deep musing.

Her arm was thrown across the balustrade, and the blossoms of the thorn which she had taken from Estelle hung over the stream. She gazed at the blooming maiden with a look full of doubt, and exclaimed, as if unable to suppress the sudden hope, "But—but well do I know the heart of Estelle; she will not forget old Jacqueline; and—and—" Her look suddenly assumed an expression of wild anxiety; she approached the fair girl, and spoke in a whisper, as if fearing to be heard even amid that deep solitude, "And is there not another, Estelle? say—the hunter, Julian! Wilt thou cease to remember him when he shall no more be found beside thee? Oh! I charge thee forget him not! The time, perchance, is nigh when thou mightest aid him well. He is hot in speech and quick in ire: but is it not disappointment which has rendered him so? Maiden, the down is yet upon his cheek, and already has he endured wrongs and woes that would long ere this have riven a less proud heart asunder.

His is the haughty soul that scorns to yield to outward grief; but can I not tell, who have nursed him on my knee, that the cankerworm has long been busy there? Where is now the sparkling eye that once brought joy to all on whom its bright glance fell? Where is the merry laugh that echoed through his father's halls from morn to night, as though neither care nor grief had place upon earth? Alas! his eye never flashes now save in anger, and it is long since his lip has worn any other smile than the bitter one of scorn."

She paused; Estelle had listened in gasping agony; each word of her speech had entered like an arrow into the maiden's heart, there to fester through many a weary hour, even while the smooth-tongued flatterers of the Court were pouring their honeyed praises in her ear.

Some few moments elapsed ere Jacqueline spoke again, but it was evident that spirit-stirring recollections were passing through her mind. Her hand was clenched convulsively,

and the flowers to which Estelle had attached such value were crushed in her grasp. She looked towards the chateau, and then, as if by a nervous motion of anger, they were cast into the stream. Estelle started, and almost unconsciously reached forward to save them; but they were already gone, and she watched with mournful interest their course down the babbling current, until, drawn by the eddy beneath the projecting leaves of a tall water-dock which grew from the bank, they were lost to sight. Jacqueline had watched them too, for, as they disappeared, she murmured to herself, "It is in truth an emblem of himself;—even thus is he cast away, who once bloomed the fairest scion of his house." Perhaps there was something in the thought which had power to arouse many a bitter remembrance, for she turned to Estelle with a coldness that reminded her of the first days of their acquaintance. "Go, Mademoiselle," said she, "hasten homeward: I was wrong to bid you think of Julian. You

must forget him, since none you have remembered but to betray; and——But I am unjust —I am unjust," she continued, as she gazed on the mild and tearful eyes of the maiden; "Estelle is not now as the cold world will one day make her. No, no, she will remember him, and with kindness, while he——But, alas! I must not linger here, lest I disclose what I had sworn to him should never pass my lips. Farewell, Estelle de la Vallée, and forget him not!"

She retired as she spoke the words; but when she was lost to sight they still trembled on the breeze, which again and again, as it sighed through the rustling boughs, seemed to repeat to Estelle that parting charge, "Forget him not! forget him not!"

## CHAPTER IV.

"Come, then, the appurtenance of welcome is fashion and ceremony." SHAKSPEARE.

It was with melancholy feelings, mingled with no small degree of alarm, that Estelle now hurried home; nor was this at all abated, when, upon entering the park, the first object which met her eye was the Count, her father, walking with rapid and hasty strides on the broad terrace before the windows of the chateau, apparently engaged in earnest conversation with the stranger Knight, whose visit to Jacqueline's cottage had caused her so much terror.

She hastily ascended the broad flight of

steps which led to the terrace, unperceived by either; and in the vestibule which opened upon it, found her old tormentor Taquine, who frankly confessed, that, having perceived the Count conversing thus eagerly with his visitor, and feeling, of course, some anxiety to know what they could possibly have to say, she had descended to listen. She was, however, as usual, willing to forego even this pleasure for the greater one of hearing herself talk, and she forthwith began to communicate to Estelle the joyful tidings of the hourly expected arrival of the King of Navarre, accompanied by the Duc de Montbel; that the stranger who was with her father had ridden with the latter from Chantilly, but having been separated from him by accident, had taken a shorter path, which had brought him thus, without introduction, to the chateau. To detail all this valuable information in the fluent manner in which it was given by Taquine, as she conducted Estelle to her mother's dressing-room, would doubtless fill a

goodly volume, to which her own various speculations, observations, and derivations, would form a valuable appendix. But no pen could possibly do justice to the flurry and agitation into which the unexpected arrival of such a princely guest had thrown the worthy Countess, and she proceeded at once to reflect, with due and steady attention, upon the colour, the material, the fashion, and manufacture of the dress in which it would be proper to receive him.

Now, it was an affair of no ordinary interest, and one which required an unusual degree of patient deliberation; and many and long were the discussions between Taquine and herself concerning the murrey-coloured velvet lined with minever, and the purple taffeta robe, with the gorgeous train of crimson, so richly embroidered in gold and seed pearl, as to excite the envy of all the other ladies of the Court, among whom she ceased to number a single friend from the very day on which she had

first worn it. So long, indeed, were these arguments prolonged, each endeavouring, if possible, to have the last word, that it was not till within a few minutes of the time which De Montbel had fixed for his arrival, and the Count had wearied himself in fruitless messages to summon the Countess to the saloon, that it was at length decided that, although the embroidered robe was rich and magnificent, yet there was more majesty in the murrey-coloured velvet; and soon after the discovery of this important fact, in all the dignity of conscious elegance, she descended, followed by Estelle and Taquine, to the saloon, there to await, with the Count and his guest, the arrival of the King of Navarre.

Estelle involuntarily shrank behind her mother as she entered, fearful to meet the stranger's eye. He, however, seemed little disposed to allow either of the ladies to pass without notice, for he instantly rose on their entrance, and advanced towards them. Per-

haps it was that De Montbel had boasted the charms of his betrothed bride; for at the sound of her name, when pronounced by her father, he directed a searching glance beneath the modest wimple with which she had hoped to conceal her features from observation. It was well that the heavy-mullioned window, with its painted glass and Gothic tracery, admitted no very vivid light into the apartment, for she coloured deeply, and trembled with an agitation which she endeavoured in vain to disguise. But she was destined to remain in doubt whether or not he had recognised her; for, with all the ease and dignity of an habitual courtier, he bowed gracefully over the dimpled hand of Madame de la Vallée, and led her at once to the head of the apartment. Estelle seated herself by her father's side, while the stranger stood, or rather leaned, against the high-backed chair of the Countess; and thus, in silence and constraint, they all appeared to await with anxiety the awful moment. Per-

haps there is no occasion upon which time appears more tedious than when it is passed in watching and waiting in suspense the arrival of some one to whom we have attached more than ordinary consequence; and thus it was with the party now assembled. The moments were spent in dull silence, occasionally broken, but not enlivened, by some common-place observation from the Count, to which a monosyllable, either from the lips of the Knight or those of the Countess, was the only answer returned.

But this was a state of things not long to be endured. It was already considerably beyond the hour at which they had been led to expect the royal party, and La Vallée was the first to betray tokens of impatience. He coughed, and hemmed, and drummed with his fingers upon the arm of his chair for some time, and at last, suddenly rising, he strode across the floor and opened the casement, to gaze on the dial-plate which stood on the terrace. He frowned

darkly and bit his lip when he saw the hour at which the hand was now pointing. He leaned forward and looked around. On the one side, in solemn grandeur, lay the dark forest; on the other, the green and smiling park; while straight onward the view extended for miles up the long unbroken avenue which formed the grand approach to the chateau; but the herd of deer grazing quietly in the park, and a few weary foresters, with axes in their hands and fagots on their heads, returning from their labour—for the sun was now fast beginning to decline—were the only living things which met his sight. He turned indignantly away, but resumed not his seat, preferring to stand in the recess of the window-frame, whence, without displaying any undignified anxiety, he could discern the first approach of the cavalcade.

Estelle did not like this movement, for she was seated immediately opposite to the casement; the stream of light which it admitted fell directly upon her face, and she became

embarrassed to perceive that she was the object of the stranger's attention. There was a certain merry waggishness in his eye betokening some secret cause of mirth, which, moreover, gave her no small uneasiness; nor was this dispelled when he suddenly moved from the spot where he had stood, and with the utmost sang-froid seated himself in the vacant chair by her side.

The staid and prudent Countess seemed quite *ébahie* at this unexpected forgetfulness of all decorum. The tall head-dress, which she wore in the fashion of her youth, when it was deemed expedient to hurl denunciations even from the pulpit against those who carried them to such an enormous height, absolutely tottered with agitation. The arms of her family—the Hautencours of Hauteville, in Haute Bretagne—embroidered in flaming coloured silks, in the front of this grotesque coiffure, absolutely quivered with the indignant tossing of her head; and the supporters, two fiery dragons, seemed to

frown grimly on the audacious stranger, whom no one knew, and no one cared for, seeing that he sadly lacked that undeniable passport of introduction, splendid attire — who appeared inclined to address an unmarried daughter of that mighty race, even in the presence of her mother. She looked imploringly at the Count for aid, but in vain; he was too much absorbed in his own protracted disappointment to take much heed of what was passing within, and neither her winks nor frowns, nor even the impatient stamping of her foot, met with the slightest attention. But the Knight did not venture to speak; he gazed in silent admiration on Estelle, nor once withdrew his eyes from her lovely face, although the angry looks and gestures of her mother could not escape his notice. Perhaps she had never appeared more beautiful than at this moment. With fond, maternal artifice, the Countess had attired her in a taffeta robe of the deepest violet, the well-known colour of De Montbel, and its full shade

rendered the soft tints of her fair complexion yet more dazzling, while the jet black wimple which covered her head caused the golden ringlets beneath to appear bright and glittering, even in the subdued and indistinct light of the apartment.

She trembled beneath the fixed glance of the stranger. It seemed as though he were on the point of speaking yet knew not what to say, and she feared each moment he would ask if he had not seen her at the cottage in the forest. An exclamation from the Count just then came most opportunely to her relief. He could discern a cloud of dust rising at the most distant verge of the horizon. It gave rise to fresh hopes, and he called upon the Knight to approach the casement.

Estelle saw the latter depart from her side with a throb of joy; and the Countess, to whom his proximity to her daughter had given such annoyance, witnessed the movement with a delight which not even the Count's reiterated

assurance of De Montbel's approach had power to increase. The stranger, however, appeared less sanguine; he knitted his brows and looked perplexed, and at last ventured to express a doubt that the troop of horsemen which they now beheld advancing, really did belong to De Montbel.

"Nay," said La Vallée, "do you not perceive the banners of his house now flying above their heads? And look, as I live, there is De Montbel himself far in advance of the rest, riding with the speed of the whirlwind! I should know him among a thousand, by his gay attire and splendid horsemanship; but—but I pray you, where is the King of Navarre? You have just left the party, Sir Knight; can you point him out to my notice?"

The Knight bit his lip and appeared confused.

"*Vive Dieu!*" exclaimed he hastily, "I see not the King of Navarre among the party!"

La Vallée turned, and looked sternly at the

stranger. He glanced suspiciously at the faded cloak and threadbare pourpoint, as though he began to suspect the wearer to be nothing less than an impostor. He was, perhaps, strengthened in this idea by the great difficulty he had found, even though putting in requisition all his wonted dexterity, in drawing forth any information concerning the intrigues of the Court, and the intentions of the King of Navarre. Of these the stranger knew nothing, although with the personal habits of the monarch he had feigned to be well acquainted; and already did the Count sincerely repent having, at his request, dispensed with half the pomp and ceremony with which it had been his intention to honour his kingly visitor; for De Bourbon was now the rising sun, and La Vallée by no means wished to be tardy in his adorations.

The horsemen were now drawing near to the chateau, and according to the rate at which they were galloping, a few moments more

would bring them to the gate. There was no time for any lengthened examination of the Knight's pretensions; and if he really had come under false colours, the presence of De Montbel could not fail to bring detection. He, however, hazarded another remark, more in expectation of being confirmed in his unfavourable opinion, than with any idea of finding it incorrect. "It is wondrous strange," said he, frowning as he spoke, "to think that you, Sir Knight, who but an hour agone were riding by De Montbel's side, should find it thus difficult to recognise him at such a short distance; while I, who have not beheld him for months, should have known him on the instant!"

"Why, in truth," said the Knight hesitatingly, "there may be cause for my error. I can now account for De Montbel's long delay. We rode from Chantilly alone and unattended, and I knew him not amid the splendid train by which he is accompanied. He must surely have ridden back to —"

The remainder of the speech was drowned by a tremendous clatter of horses' hoofs on the pavement below, announcing a general rush of the whole cavalcade into the court-yard. But it would have needed much less than the stranger had said to convince the Count that he would find the doubts which he had entertained concerning the rank and qualifications of his guest fully justified when De Montbel should appear; for the courier had distinctly asserted that Henry of Navarre was already on his route, together with the Duke. He, however, for the moment, dismissed the thought from his mind, for with him dignity and etiquette were paramount to all other considerations; and how to receive with due gravity and importance the King of Navarre was the first question. He returned to his seat, congratulating himself with no small degree of self-complacency, that by his excellent management the whole household below was in readiness to receive the illustrious visitor with all the ho-

nours due to his rank. His astonishment may therefore be easily conceived, when the next moment his ears were greeted by a deafening shout from De Montbel's followers, calling for the Count's grooms to assist in stabling the horses.

La Vallée started from his chair. Already nervous and excited by the anticipation of this important moment, he was now almost distracted by the noise, and much perplexed as to its cause. He clapped his hands to summon the page in waiting, but no one appeared, and in a transport of rage he rushed into the antechamber.

His fury was increased upon finding the page tricked out in all the bravery of crimson and gold, stretched at his full-length in the window-seat, heedless of the clamour without,—in short, buried in a slumber so profound, that it seemed likely to rival in depth and duration that of the Seven Sleepers. His flat velvet cap, with the gold loop and button and drooping

ostrich feather, had fallen from his head, and lay beside him on the floor, amid a chaos and confusion which made the heart of the Count sink with dismay, as he looked around and reflected that through this chamber his visitors must pass to reach the saloon.

On a chair near the window lay a pipe and pewter dish with which the boy had been blowing bubbles in order to beguile the tedious moments, until, weary of this amusement, he had kicked away the chair, and having unconsciously upset the dish, its contents had soaked through the tapestried cushion and formed a pool of no small extent beneath. The numerous shreds of paper, interspersed with curiously-cut effigies of pigs, geese, and poultry, that were strewn in every direction over the floor, but too plainly showed the purpose to which he had applied the holy books of devotion that the worthy Chaplain had kindly furnished to aid his meditations while on duty in the antechamber. La Vallée drew near and

shook him rudely by the collar until he awoke, when, on thus finding himself in his master's presence, between stupidity and terror, he burst into a fit of crying not very easy to pacify, sobbing and begging pardon, and it was some time ere he had sufficiently regained his senses to comprehend the purport of the Count's commands, to hurry down and bring back news of what was passing below. The latter returned to the saloon calm and collected as though nothing had happened to ruffle his temper. Far otherwise would it have been could he but have formed an idea of the utter confusion and dismay into which De Montbel's tardy arrival had thrown the zealous members of his household. They who at the time appointed had been ready to greet his coming, were now as unprepared as though they had received no intimation whatever; for unable to pursue their ordinary avocations, they had been obliged to resort to can and keg, in order to kill time, and were lounging about in groups, engaged in friendly chat or angry debate,

according to the strength or quantity of the liquor they had taken. Many, like the poor little page, overcome by lassitude, had fallen asleep, and lay on the stone benches, placed at equal distances round the forecourt, while others were busily occupied in play, betting and staking with all the boisterous energy of professed gamesters. One party having carefully doffed the gala suits in which they were attired, had engaged in a game of tennis, and revelled in perfect security amid the excitement and delight of ball and racket, having previously taken the wise precaution to dispatch two of their fellows, for a trifling reward, up the avenue, to give notice of the first sight of De Montbel.

It is needless to say that these worthies did not return. It was doubtless eagerness to fulfil their mission to the entire satisfaction of their employers, which led them far beyond the avenue, even to the *Cloche d'or*, the village cabaret. Certain it is that there they were

found sitting at ease, perfectly indifferent as to who went or who came, so long as the jolly host would but consent to broach the best Burgundy, and troll forth the doleful adventures of *Isaie le Triste.*

Such was the scene which burst upon the astonished De Montbel, when, with horses prancing, banners flying, and plumes waving, he rode so gallantly into the court-yard. The affrighted varlets slunk away in conscious shame; and had not the rude clamour of the Duke's followers, creating a fear that it would reach their master's ear, induced them to return, it is not unlikely that, after all the preparation and ceremony, the whole party would have had to dismount and seek food and stabling for their steeds where best they might.

But misfortunes seemed destined never to end: for worse than all this, the flaxen-haired Alexis, the luckless page who had been deputed from the antechamber with strict injunctions to return immediately, being much more

occupied with his own gay appearance than with the Count's commands, in passing the marble fountain which adorned the middle of the court, had mounted the step, and while stretching over this primitive mirror, in childish vanity, to admire the dainty fashion of his new satin doublet, had lost his balance, and pitching head foremost, lay in most ludicrous plight, his body immersed in the water, and his legs, clothed in the white trunk hose of the period, slashed and puffed with crimson, kicking and flourishing in the air, until some one rushed to his assistance, amid the uncontrollable and boisterous laughter of the new-comers. The page was rescued from his perilous situation without injury ; but, alas ! to restore the crimson satin doublet, with its snow-white linings and gold embroidery, or the velvet hat, which, after filling with water, had slowly sunk to the bottom, to their former beauty and freshness, was beyond all power; and it was soon perceived how totally unfit he had been rendered

by this accident to appear in the Count's presence, or to announce the high and mighty strangers.

Here then was a dilemma: but the unwelcome office, after being bandied about through the household, was at length joyfully accepted by the aged *concierge* of the chateau. This old man, although sour and taciturn early in the day, unaccountably began, after the hour of noon, to grow gradually officious, talkative, and ripe for adventure. It was remarked by some, that in proportion as his spirits rose, the Count's flagons visibly diminished; but many yet disbelieved the fact, from his vehement declamations against drunkenness, and his long and prosy exhortations to sobriety. It had been no difficult task to prevail on him to undertake a duty that all were so anxious to escape. He agreed to every thing—he would do any thing—so that he were but allowed to bear a part in the ceremony, being in one of those peculiarly lofty

moods in which he always fancied himself a being of no ordinary genius, and fitted to take a share in any enterprise, however bold or hazardous it might be. The recreant domestics, too glad to find a scapegoat, were not slow to encourage this idea; and presently the old man ascended to the antechamber, with all the dignity which threescore and ten years, and the gold wand of office which he bore in his hand, could possibly bestow.

In the mean while the Count had been eagerly awaiting in the saloon the first sign of the page's return; and the banging of doors and noise of footsteps which preceded the steward's entrance, relieved his mind from a load of anxiety, as, while wondering at the length of time which the former had been absent, he already began to repent having despatched him below.

While these thoughts yet occupied his mind, the folding-doors of the saloon were thrown back with a violent swing. La Vallée drew

himself up with dignity, and firmly grasped the elbow of his chair, as if to assist him in rising. The stranger Knight threw his riding-cloak carelessly across his shoulders, and the ladies stretched forward, each anxious to catch the first glimpse of the long-expected King of Navarre.

" Monseigneur le Duc de Montbel !" said, or rather shouted, a voice in the antechamber, which La Vallée instantly knew to be that of the young Duke's Spanish equerry, who always accompanied his master, being remarkable for delivering, with true Spanish pomp and emphasis, the long list of titles which graced his high name.

The Count turned pale, when, instead of the silvery tones of the blooming Alexis repeating the words, the somewhat squeaking voice of the old *concierge* fell upon his ear, and at the same moment he entered with shuffling pace, and advanced nearly to where his master was seated. The latter stared at the messenger for an instant, unable to comprehend the

meaning of this strange intrusion; but his presence of mind did not forsake him. It instantly occurred to him that something amiss had happened to the page, and he nodded his head in token of satisfaction, hoping to dismiss this withered representative of youth and bloom without further trouble. The old man retired, bowing and smirking, to the door; but alas! his task was far from accomplished. Again did the thundering tones of the Spaniard shout forth with an overwhelming pause between each title:—

"Monseigneur le Duc de Montbel! Marquis de la Meilleraye! Comte de Florville! Vicomte de Belleville! Baron de Motteville! et Seigneur Chatelain de Mireville! Granville, et Hauteville!"

The aged usher hobbled back, his good-humour somewhat diminished. He delivered about half the ponderous list, and again retired with a grin. This was not all; no sooner had he reached the door, than the voice of his tormentor again assailed him:—

"Go back," said he pettishly; "the offices my master holds must not be forgotten:—Gouverneur de Charleville! Vidame de Senneville! Gentilhomme de la chambre du Roi! Cap——"

The *concierge* turned sharply round; he would listen to no more—he had been gradually getting more and more confused until he scarcely knew what had been said.

"Go back," said he, repeating to the Count word for word what the Equerry had uttered, "the offices my master holds must not be forgotten!" But here he paused; he could go no further, but remained *planté là*, endeavouring in vain to remember more.

The Count bit his lip and trembled with passion.

"Where is Alexis?" whispered the Countess, ready to weep with vexation at this total subversion of all etiquette in presence of a stranger, who, although too courteous to notice it, was evidently highly diverted by the

scene. Even Estelle could not suppress a smile at the old man's foolish embarrassment, as he awkwardly shuffled from one leg to the other, in his endeavours to recollect the rest; while Taquine, less constrained, or perhaps possessing less refinement than the others, was almost convulsed with laughter.

"Colonel de la Garde du Roi!—that you should know without telling," just then roared the indefatigable Equerry, fancying that by this time the messenger must be again near the door. The latter, whose head was already half turned by the awkwardness of the position in which he stood, hailed this as a relief; but unfortunately at that moment chancing to meet the fiery eye of his master, it completely overset what little sense remained. The words had struck upon his ear, but not upon his understanding, and scarcely conscious of what he was saying, he drawled forth, in quavering tones—"Colonel de la Garde du Roi!—that you should know without telling!"

This was more than La Vallée could bear. De Montbel's step was already heard on the staircase; there was nothing on earth he dreaded more than the young Duke's sarcasm, and the idea of appearing ridiculous in his sight galled him to the quick.

"Enough! Begone, sirrah!" said he, while his eye kindled with fury.

But the poor old man was now much too frightened to stir. He stood staring vacantly around, as if seeking for help, while the tall wand which he held trembled in his grasp.

"Membre du Conseil!—Pair de France!" again thundered forth the Spaniard on the one hand.

"Begone, this moment!" said the Count on the other.

He hesitated. The Count stamped his foot.

"Grand Chambellan!" screamed his persecutor from the antechamber.

"*Ah, peste! peste! soit de tout le monde!*" exclaimed the *concierge*, and forgetting, in his

alarm, where he stood and who he was — in short, every thing but the necessity of making his escape as soon as possible, with a sudden jerk he twisted round and trotted out of the apartment without farther ceremony,—the long sleeves of his jerkin, which hung uselessly from his shoulders, something after the fashion of that of a modern hussar, dangling and flirting in sympathy with the wearer's agitation.

Well was it for the offender that he did not linger another instant, for scarcely had he thus taken his departure, when a gale of perfume, fragrant as the spicy breezes of Arabia, was wafted up the stairs; a footstep soft and light was heard approaching, and then the handsome, the gay, the witty, the courtly Duke de Montbel stood before them.

The Count looked anxiously beyond the door in full expectation that the King of Navarre was yet to follow; but, alas! no sooner had the Duke entered than it was closed, and betokened that no other visitor was to be expected.

So great was his disappointment at this circumstance, that he entirely forgot to rise and welcome De Montbel; and it was not till the latter, sliding up the polished oaken floor with courtly grace, had reached the head of the apartment, that, roused by the repeated winks and hems of the agitated Countess, he awoke to a sense of his neglect, and hastened to receive his guest with a fruitless attempt to appear pleased on beholding him.

But it was not, however, the Duke de Montbel who could be disconcerted by any reception, however cold, from his future father-in-law. He had already profited by the total absence of mind which the latter betrayed; for he had already raised himself on tiptoe three successive times to look at himself in the mirror in the dark oak frame at the further end of the apartment, and, with the cuff of his gold-bespangled doublet, rubbed a few specks of dust from the mantle over his shoulder; he had combed up his ringlets with his fingers, and

wiped his beard with his scented kerchief; he had already told the ladies all the most recent news from the Court; delighting the Countess by informing her that "the Pouffencours had rejected the alliance of their old friends the Poufadours, in consequence of the rascally baton sinister in their shield;" and telling Estelle, his own sweet woodland violet, as he called her, that "Julien Perichon, the King's lutist, had recently wrought an exceeding sweet and pleasant melody, the which he had brought, that she might sing it to her lute." All this having done, he seated himself by her side, and began humming it most tastefully, beating the measure, with his embroidered glove, upon the crown of his velvet toque, which hung negligently upon his knee.

It would be perhaps difficult to imagine a handsomer face or more graceful form than those presented by the young Gascon nobleman as he thus reclined with studied ease upon his chair. It was that soft and silken beauty

which might, perhaps, have been deemed effeminate, had not a kind of restless merry malice played for ever around his mouth and in his eye, divesting his countenance of the *fadeur* which is generally found the concomitant of this style of beauty.

He was young, very young, apparently not more than two-and-twenty, and all the fresh graces of boyhood had not as yet entirely vanished. His high forehead was still white as snow, and shaded by thick curls of the brightest auburn; his cheek was yet unbronzed by time; care had not planted a single wrinkle there, and its rosy smoothness was unbroken save by sparkling dimples. His dark blue eye flashed gaily from beneath the long brown lashes—but perhaps a physiognomist would have declared that it was bright and piercing, and might not always wear the same thoughtless expression; while his brow was somewhat proudly arched, and gave reason to believe that his fathers had left him the memory of many a

valiant deed, as well as a high and mighty name.

His attire was most splendid, and from the ruff of point-lace which encircled his throat, to the roses on his white *escarpins*, plainly bespoke how much pains he had taken to appear to the best advantage. His doublet was of a pale yellow satin, braided with gold and silver; the cloak was of velvet, of a rich violet, and notwithstanding the thickness of its texture, was drawn into easy and graceful folds by the weight of the gold embroidery. There was elegance even in the display of the white satin lining and ermine trimming, where it was turned back over his shoulder, that added much grace to his general appearance. The most unconcerned could not have passed without notice the superb star of brilliants which fastened the long plumes of his velvet cap; neither could any have beheld the blaze of jewels in the handle of his rapier, without remembering it for many a day.

Every thing about the youth was characteristic of the foppish, fastidious court, wherein he himself was considered among the most foppish and fastidious; and yet, whether he possessed the art of concealing this boyish vanity, or that it suited well with his habitual liveliness, matters little; but true it is that the most scrutinizing could scarcely have detected the least symptom of affectation, save that, in the studied manner in which his leg and foot were thrown forward, might be perceived the sly intent of displaying their exquisite symmetry; but there are few of our readers who could not pardon this, on the part of a young lover, just in the presence of his mistress.

It was some time ere La Vallée, who was much annoyed at the careless, *dégagé* air with which the Duke was humming a paltry ballad, while he was expiring with anxiety, could summon indifference enough to utter a cold and stern,

"You are late, my Lord."

The remark was unfortunate at the moment, for it arrested De Montbel in one of his most brilliant *roulades*, as, with one hand pressed upon his bosom, he skimmed the air with the other, in a soft and graceful flourish to assist expression. The sharp tone in which La Vallée spoke caused him to turn; he gazed at the austere countenance of the latter for a moment, and his own broke into a thousand merry dimples, as he threw himself back, and indulged in a peal of laughter which echoed to the very ceiling.

The Count grew red in the face; he thought that the Duke had misunderstood him, and he repeated rather petulantly,

"You are late, my Lord;" and added, in order to make it more impressive—"we have tarried your arrival long."

De Montbel laughed the more, and La Vallée, as might well be expected, grew more angry, for the former was by no means successful in his endeavours to check his mirth;

and he still chuckled with glee, as he replied,

"Nay, nay, methinks I came even now too soon. If I had arrived much sooner, I know not how we might have fared. Of a truth, ye keep late hours at Avilly; ha! it was not so at Court, where ye were all up and stirring, ere yet we had played our last stake at hombre. Look, the sun is setting, and yet the *piquers*, the *veneurs*, the *valets-de-chasse*, the *valets-de-pied*, and, in short, all the rest of the varlets, were literally in their undress suits when I entered; while one little coquin, the only one amongst them in decent trim, was bathing in the fountain without even so much as doffing his mantle."

The Count looked aghast. He was immediately convinced that the Duke's merriment was occasioned by some ludicrous circumstance which had taken place below. He coughed, and fidgeted, and wished to appear unconcerned.

"I am rejoiced to—to—see you so merry,

M. de Montbel," said he, while his eye completely belied the assertion; "but—but—you are alone; I had expected that—"

"Ah, well, I mind it not; I know you expected they were in readiness," interrupted the Duke. "Ha! ha! it has afforded me mirth for a year to come, and when—"

"Nay, but, my Lord, I was going to observe, that I had expected—"

"Tut, tut, say no more,—I am in no wise aggrieved. *Sandis!* if we were to trouble our heads about the varlets, we should have but little time for anything beside. To speak truth, I would not have missed it for the whole world. Such a scene! the frightened caitiffs running here and there in search of their jerkins, and seizing the first that came to hand, heedless of their own height, breadth, or circumference! How the King will laugh!—and the gaudy little page—ha! ha! ha!—with his head under water, exploring the secrets of the fountain, like a duck in a village pond! and the—"

"But, Monseigneur—"

"How the King will laugh, for he loves a gossip," continued De Montbel, without heeding the interruption; "he will doubtless get me to tell it at his *lever* to-morrow: 'twill suit exactly to put his Council in good-humour, that they may give his Majesty another day's respite, and not press him for awhile on state affairs."

The Count was now in a downright passion, and it was with difficulty he could restrain it from bursting forth. His mere glance would have checked any other than the hardened De Montbel, as he exclaimed, at length, "But M. de Montbel, I would speak of other matters, — the King of Navarre, — the King of Navarre!"

"Ha! ha! by the by," again laughed the Duke, "there is no one can relish a joke better than the King of Navarre: it was downright ill-luck in him to have missed all this fun. Why it would have—"

"Nay, but my dear De Montbel," sim-

pered forth the Countess, who perceived the scarlet glow upon La Vallée's cheek, and feared an explosion, "the Count de la Vallée would know why the King of Navarre—Ask him, Estelle, love," she continued, colouring with vexation, as she felt the very floor vibrate with the low suppressed laughter of the stranger Knight, who stood behind her chair, "ask him why the King of Navarre is not—"

"Nay," exclaimed the Count, in that tone of authority which he would have assumed towards a perverse and froward child, "M. de Montbel can surely leave trifling for an instant, and tell us plainly why the King of Navarre has not deigned to honour us with a visit."

"Ah, true, true; de Montbel, dearest, where is the King of Navarre?" repeated the Countess meekly, and putting up her mouth, as she caught de Montbel's eye, as a sort of warning to trifle no longer.

"In truth, I wot not," returned the Duke, to her great dismay, for this time he really did

speak seriously;—"in truth, I wot not, for the air of Avilly has already had the same effect upon him as upon others, and stolen away his senses."

"But, Monseigneur, your courier said that he was already on the road, and yonder worthy cavalier—"

"Nay, but listen; 'twas true enough; we departed from the palace together, and without other company." The Count frowned, and gazed at the stranger, who turned aside, as if unwilling to meet his glance. "And in plain suits, too," continued the Duke, "like two mere *spadassins;* for, to speak truth, I had nothing but my purple velvet suit, with the sable trimmings and silver lacings; and as for the King himself, his very mantle,—pah!—I will not shock your feelings; but he persuaded me myself, the Duke de Montbel, to come hither in such plight—Only think of his powers of persuasion! But no sooner had we entered the wood, when already did we seem

bewitched, for a wild blast of a trumpet shook the forest to its very foundations: so like a challenge to combat *à outrance,* that I was for pricking our steeds in the direction whence it came, while his Majesty declared first that he heard it not, although it wellnigh split my ears, and then that it was not worthy notice. Now, had it ended here, I might still have thought him sane; but, lo! while we were yet in argument, another sound yet more harsh and horrible was heard—a wailing woeful howl—not unlike the cries of a flogged mastiff; and then the King straightway started from the path, and beat into the wood, declaring that the hunt was out, and he could not resist following it. Now, if that be the way in which you hunt at Avilly, I pray you ask me not to join you while I have ears and nerves, and hold them in the slightest estimation."

The Count looked unutterable things, but contempt and indignation most particularly.

"And did you not follow his Majesty?" asked

the Countess, to whom this want of respect instantly suggested itself as the greatest offence of which he could have been guilty.

" 'Twas vain to essay it," replied the Duke; " my rose-coloured satin sash, the very one that the King himself gave me, was torn in the endeavour; and so, after having called, and bawled, and shouted after him in vain, I turned back to the palace, to get myself in decent plight, and summon a proper retinue, ere I entered my father's most august and awful presence; and, verily, if I had now but the agraffe of rubies which I lost to d'Epernon, I should—"

" Psha! and so you have not since beheld him!" interrupted the Count, in utter astonishment.

" I have not since beheld him," repeated the Duke in perfect unconcern. " To speak truth, I should not wonder if, after all, he is returned to Chantilly; for 'tis just the full of the moon;"—he touched his forehead significantly

—" and this very morn d'Aubigné, who could not get from his Majesty the forty gold marcs he has owed him so long, told me—but whisper it not abroad—that the King of Navarre was always just so at full of the moon !"

" Then is d'Aubigné a false and perjured traitor !" exclaimed the stranger Knight, stepping suddenly forward, " and, moreover, a slandering, backbiting knave !—and, moreover —*Vive Dieu !* when next we go to battle, he shall be set to guard the baggage," added he, half angry, half laughing, to witness the young Duke's utter amazement.

The latter stood looking foolish and perplexed, yet evidently much inclined to laugh, in spite of his embarrassment. " Who could have thought," exclaimed he at length, blushing as deep as scarlet,—" who could have thought that your Majesty's very self—"

The word was electric: the Count started from his chair; the Countess sank backward, half fainting, in her's, exclaiming in agony,

"'Tis the King of Navarre!—Gracious Heavens! he has been standing this hour, and we bade him not be seated!"

Estelle uttered a faint scream, and even the rubicund tinge fled for a moment from the point of Taquine's nose, although it had been immovable for years. All, in truth, had cause for alarm. The Count himself, during the walk on the terrace with his guest, had tried to extort all information concerning Henry de Navarre, and in so doing had let slip divers rash opinions respecting him, in the vain hope of seducing his companion to join in them. The Countess had not shown him the least attention, nor even once, as she herself observed, begged him to be seated. It is not difficult to guess the cause of Estelle's dismay; and as for Taquine, she had been winking and blinking at the stranger for the last half hour, whenever any thing had struck her as particularly comical either in the Count or Countess.

But the good-natured King was too anxious

to give vent to the malicious mirth which had been so long suppressed, to keep silence; he glanced just once at de Montbel; in an instant they understood each other, and both burst into a fit of laughter loud and long continued. La Vallée, who knew that on such occasions there is aid in a little confusion, took advantage of their merriment to express his sorrow and regret, "That he had not known his Majesty at first sight; but it was so long since he had beheld him, and his Majesty was so much altered—of course, improved in appearance —that, in truth, he was difficult to recognize." And the Countess came most fortunately to his aid; for, although in rising, being somewhat agitated, she had trodden upon the train of her murrey-coloured velvet, yet, for once, her temper was unruffled, and she busied herself in drawing a chair for her royal guest, the very one in which she had herself been seated. This civility was, of course, duly acknowledged but declined by the King, who was forced, so

great was her loyal sorrow, to take the utmost pains to convince her, that, if he had any grief, it was certainly not of *long standing*. He told them, in his own good-humoured manner, that he was in no wise offended, and yet amply revenged himself for their neglect, by laughing at them all; and as for d'Aubigné, he turned to de Montbel, and exclaimed, —"*Vive Dieu!* de Montbel, thou hast done us kindly service, in telling all the base lies which yonder false traitor has uttered concerning us. We will not render him so much as one of the forty golden marks we owe him, but rather keep them as *aubaine* of the heavy fine to which he is subject for speaking treason of the King his master."

## CHAPTER V.

"C'est lui—d'un esprit vif aimable et facile."
VOLTAIRE.

OF all the favourites of Henry de Valois—and perhaps no Christian monarch could ever boast a greater number—none were so beloved, none had obtained so great an influence over him, as the young Duke de Montbel; and, to do him justice, none were so worthy of his friendship. He was from Gascony, and, of a surety, belied not his province—the land of warm hearts and smiling faces. It appeared, indeed, as though in mirth and ready wit he far exceeded all that could be expected, even from one of his country. He was of those whom

Fortune delights to load with her gifts, merely because Nature has already set her the example. Handsome and well-favoured, young and gay, he had nothing to hope for, nothing to desire. The King never smiled but when he was nigh; the court was dull when he was absent; he seemed fitted to pass through life without care or sorrow; these were, as yet, unheeded and unknown: he knew they had existence—but where he cared not, it was nothing to him, so long as they came not near the King, his friend and master.

To those who did not take the pains to look beyond the harmless foppery, which, to common observers, formed the only striking feature in his character, he was nothing more than the favourite de Montbel, the handsomest youth at Court, and ever the most superbly attired; with a ready smile for all and a frown for none; who drove ennui as far from the King as possible, and could not for a moment be spared; but those who knew him would tell of the goodness of his heart, and deep devo-

tion to the King: they would speak of the boundless generosity to which the latter owed exemption for awhile from the harassing embarrassments which had so long distressed him; and while some would blink and look wise, and throw out hints concerning the young Duke's frequent short retirements from Court, and journeys into Gascony, those would still tell of his aged mother, and of the kind and dutiful love for her which caused them.

It will be perhaps wondered that Estelle should not have discovered all this hidden worth; but she had thought with the rest, that he was, as he appeared, all surface; she had shrunk from his buoyant spirits; they suited not with her meek retiring nature. And now it was too late! her heart had long ago been borne away by the haughty, dark-eyed forester; and by comparison, the gay and merry de Montbel seemed like the gaudy summer-flower, glowing but in sunshine; while the proud and lofty soul of Julian was as the gnarled and stubborn oak, round which, like

the frail ivy, her gentle spirit could have twined, content to be supported by its strength, and nurtured in its shade.

Poor de Montbel was, all this while, perfectly secure in possessing her love; for whom had he ever sought to please without success? He thought no longer how to win her love—he deemed it already won; and his sole anxiety was now to prove all the depth and tenderness of his own. With that open-handed generosity for which he was so remarkable, fête and revels of the most gorgeous description, of which she was at once the idol and the queen, now made merry the once silent woods of Chantilly, and she was the envy and admiration of all. But nothing could waken her from the calm trance into which she had so lately fallen. She moved in seeming unconcern among the gay and thoughtless crowd; yet was her heart far from the joyous scenes in which she was compelled to take a share — even amid the shades of the silent forest. Often, while wan-

dering with listless steps upon the marble terrace of the chateau, even while surrounded by all the wit and gaiety of the Court, would she turn a stealthy gaze towards the path which led to the lonely cabin of the *vachère*, and sometimes, ere she withdrew her eyes, they were filled with tears. She sighed to think of Jacqueline, and for a time fancied that it was regret for her alone that caused her thoughts to dwell so fondly on the happy hours she had passed at her side. But it cannot be supposed that he who so long had shared her peaceful joy was now forgotten. Ah, no! alas! the sad remembrance of his deep consuming grief and undeserved misfortunes; the story of his wrongs, as told with all a mother's anguish by Jacqueline, haunted her like a dream, and suffered her not to know the peace of mind which had hitherto been her's. And thus, although the smile was still upon her cheek, her heart was desolate; the love which she once had cherished for her father, long settled into disgust at his

grasping avarice and cold-hearted cruelty, was now destined to change to bitter contempt, at the base hypocrisy he displayed in his intercourse with de Montbel, for whom he feigned the greatest friendship. Towards the young Duke himself her feelings had unjustly chilled almost into dislike. She knew not why, except that they partook largely of a restless, never-ceasing dread, that each day he would take steps to hasten their nuptials. And the dreaded moment did come at last; and the day—ay, the hour was fixed, which was to make her his bride. It was then, and not till then, that a silent hope, long nourished so deeply in her bosom as to have been a secret even to herself, at once gave way to gloom and disappointment. She had pictured to herself a future of difficulties vanquished, and hardships overcome, but not for de Montbel's sake; and in the dream of happiness to which her fancy led, he had no share. It was the thought of Julian l'Evêque, the dark-browed hunter of the forest,

the unknown, homeless, and friendless Ligueur, which had caused her heart to throb with hope and joy, even while viewing her father's artful schemes, and listening to de Montbel's vows.

She had fancied that the Duke would not press his suit, as each day the declining power of the King, and the growing fame of Henry de Navarre, rendered her father's claim to Avilly less secure; but, like the rest, she had been deceived in her suitor's character. To him the retiring modesty of Estelle was worth all the glitter of the courtly dames who at that time crowded round the throne; and from the moment he had first beheld her sweet and blushing graces, he had marked her for his own. He loved her now, and not all the wealth of the universe had power to make him change. By others, the sudden alteration from seeming happiness to evident despondency, which took place in his betrothed bride from the time that the period of her marriage became no longer

doubtful, was disregarded. To de Montbel alone, who watched her with the vigilant eye of love, did it give uneasiness. His pride at first took alarm—he thought of other attachments, and looked around with jealousy upon all the young noblemen whom he thought likely to be rivals. But soon did he own himself deceived. She gazed upon them all with the same brow of gloom; not one could restore, even for an instant, the joyous smiles which had so lately vanished without apparent cause; and he was forced to seek consolation in the assurance, that it was but regret to leave her kind, beloved parents, which had caused the change. With kind and delicate attention, he sought to win her from this cold reserve; and fête after fête was given in her honour, but yet the weight upon her spirits seemed not to be dispelled. He could not fail to perceive how vain were all his efforts to restore that gaiety, the loss of which had so perplexed him; yet he relaxed not in his endeavours, and every art was tried that he thought likely to succeed.

He had observed with what a show of pleasure Estelle had always hailed any excursion to the forest, and with attentive gallantry, parties were planned, and entertainments imagined for her amusement, day after day, amid the sweet umbrage of the wood; and in these alone did she seem to take interest.

It was on one of these occasions that de Montbel had formed a fowling-party among the young Seigneurs then at Chantilly, from which much amusement was anticipated. The suggestion was eagerly acceded to by all the ladies, on account of its novelty; and with bright smiles and merry looks they set forward on the day appointed, to witness the sport, and encourage the sportsmen. They had far to go, into the very thickest of the wood, and litters were provided, whose bright coloured silken awnings made a gay appearance as they fluttered in the breeze; while the small gilt bells, which hung in clusters round the light frame-work, jingling with each motion of the fair inmate, made pleasant music, as she

bent forward to laugh and chat with the cavalier at her side. The noble sportsmen themselves, each attired in the colour of his house, mostly of the gayest kind, and bearing a fowling-net and hooked iron instrument, wherewith to separate the tangled branches, followed on foot; and although their game was to be sought amid the green foliage, yet did their eyes more frequently turn to the litters, to gaze on the beauteous forms within.

The King, who was delighted with any new plan of killing time, had joyfully agreed to be of the party; but being delayed by some unforeseen event, had subsequently proposed to join them at the hour of noon, at a certain spot, with his own immediate train.

On arriving hither, however, the whole assembly were surprised and chagrined to find, instead of the King and a large band of followers as they had expected, only a single messenger, with a thousand apologies from his Majesty to his loving cousin de Bourbon, for

his non-attendance, but pleading in excuse, the arrival of important despatches, demanding instant attention; which would, moreover, confine him the whole day within the palace.

Now it was well known among the male portion of the party, at least, that no affair of state, however important, could restrain him from a party of pleasure; and the conviction that something unusual had occurred, checked their eagerness in the sport, and filled them with apprehension. The ladies too, who had worn their brightest smiles and best attire, in order to charm the heart of the King, vacant since the death of the Princess de Condé, began to pout a little at the unwelcome intelligence; and thus, by the time they had alighted to take refreshment, a gloomy silence had taken place of the mirth and laughter which were before heard.

The Queen, the beauteous Louise de Vaudemont, whose fatal gift of loveliness had proved her bane, in attracting the King while her heart was breaking for love of the Count de

Salm, had been induced, for once, to relax from that austere devotion in which she had lately sought a refuge from despair, and join the excursion. The idea of having (even at the request of her confessor) committed this most useless sin, rendered her more than usually gloomy; and on alighting from her litter, instead of taking refreshment with the rest, she rather chose to fast, as penance, and sitting apart, began reading the prayers from her gilt *formulaire* in a loud unbroken whisper, which effectually checked any merriment among the courtiers.

La Vallée himself was wretched;—he knew that the King must be in want of advice,—there were none nigh at hand to give it: perhaps, by yielding to de Montbel's solicitations in thus joining a foolish, bird-catching party—as in his own mind he termed it—he had lost the opportunity of making his fortune, or, perhaps, even stepping into de Montbel's place, by securing the gratitude of the King for timely

counsel. His only desire was to get back to Chantilly before the rest, in order to obtain the first intimation of what new event had occurred, that his own plans might be matured before those of his rivals could yet be devised.

The spot on which they had fixed to halt was on the very verge of the estate of Avilly; dark and lonely, and chosen for its impenetrable umbrage, being a refuge from the sun, who now, however, with his usual perverseness on such occasions, absolutely refused to shine, but, concealing himself behind a dark overhanging cloud, seemed resolved, as they had sighed for shade, not to disappoint their wishes. It was in vain that the gentlemen tried to create a kind of factitious gaiety, by drinking largely of the wine which had been provided: dullness and disappointment had obtained the mastery, and all their efforts to chase them away but rendered them more apparent. Even the King of Navarre, who, on ordinary occasions, was the very soul of wit and mirth,

seemed saddened and depressed, and could find nothing more than a few common-place observations at command, until a raven, perching in the branches of the oak beneath which they were seated, sent forth its hoarse, mournful note, and was remarked by one of the ladies as an omen of ill. It was then that, roused by the recollections which that sound inspired, he told why he could never hear it without a shudder. He spoke of those horrid nights he had passed before the massacre of the Saint Barthelemi, when, sleeping in the apartment of his cousin, Charles the Ninth, they had both been aroused at midnight for many successive nights by the dismal croaking of ravens, mingled with hollow groans and cries for aid, as of persons in the agonies of death; how they had listened in speechless terror, until, summoning courage to rise, they beheld in the moonlight a flight of these ill-omened birds, wheeling and soaring above the building; and all knew of the horrible death that befell many shortly after, who were then sleeping there in safety.

The company looked around in mute and painful dread. The clouds had gathered dark and fast while they had been listening, and a violent land wind suddenly springing up, sighed mournfully through the trees. The spot where they had halted, merely shady when the sun was shining, became damp and chilly when uncheered by his presence. The ladies shivered, and sighed for their cheerful apartments in the palace. There was not, in fact, one of the party who would not now have gladly turned home, but each feared to be the first to move.

Silence had reigned for some minutes, and the raven again screamed from the topmost bough of the oak. The harebrained young Marquis de Liancourt, whose youthful spirits had hitherto stood alone proof against the contagion of dullness, in vain endeavoured to drive the bird away, by casting his fowling net among the branches. At first he laughed in reckless glee at his own useless exertions, as they served but to bring down a shower of

leaves upon the heads of the ladies beneath; but none joined in his merriment: the raven screamed yet hoarser than before, and he, too, at length resumed his seat, inspired with the same melancholy which had overcome the rest.

"It is well that Queen Catherine is not here," said de Montbel at length, making a wondrous effort to speak in a cheerful tone; "she would say that the dirge of one of us is now being chanted over our heads."

"*Pasques Dieu!*" said de Bourbon, in a whisper; "she would know in an instant for whom it was sung. She has marvellous skill in augury, and has ofttimes read aright the doom of those around her."

"Then," exclaimed a talkative old lady, who had been attached to the court of Catherine, "has she the skill and wit of old Finelli, the Italian astrologer, whom I once heard tell the names of those who were doomed ere long to die! and I warrant me, not one of those he named are living now."

"May be they were chiefly Protestants," said Henry, with a wan smile.

"Nay, nay, your Majesty," returned the old lady sharply; "de Guise himself, who led our Catholics, was of the list, and many more whose faith was never questioned. There was, for instance, the old Count d'Espignac—a stauncher Catholic never existed—he too was of the number; and sure enough he laid his head upon the block soon after, and died a traitor's death!"

"Ay, and did he merit that hard fate?" said Henry.

"It matters not, it matters not," returned the old lady; "what once Finelli had spoken must come true: had he been never so loyal, still would d'Espignac have died. Ay, and now I mind, he spoke another prophecy—he said the d'Espignacs had long been a doomed race, but now it was nigh fulfilment; they would never see another generation!"

Estelle here listened with eagerness, for she

had already heard from Jacqueline of the dark mysterious doom which hung over that expiring house, and the story had created a kind of romantic interest in Adhémar, which the old woman had spared no pains to foster. The lady proceeded.

"No wonder, then, that from that time we saw with sorrow (for we were all united then) how the lovely Countess drooped and sickened: she died shortly after; and, heigho! the Count perished on the scaffold! And then their son, Count Adhémar, the heir to these broad lands, stood alone of all that line of pride; but he has doubtless long ago accomplished Finelli's sentence, for in de Guise's time he was hot and turbulent, and all the talk was of Count Adhémar; but now it is long since he has been heard of."

"*Vive Dieu!* but this is lucky news for our friend La Vallée there, if he believes the old curmudgeon's prophecy," said Henry de Bourbon, drily, and without raising his

eyes from an emerald ring which he was sliding from one finger to the other in manifest agitation.

No notice was taken of his speech, and he supposed that it had fallen pointless; but he had secret reason for wishing to probe the feelings of the Count, and suffered not the subject to drop.

"What think you, La Vallée, is it not joyous intelligence?" said he again, yet more urgently.

There was still silence; no answer was returned.

"My father has left us, Sire," said the low soft accents of Estelle. The King started, and looked sternly at the place where La Vallée had been seated. "So please your Majesty," continued Estelle meekly, on perceiving the colour rise to the King's cheek, "my father is somewhat advanced in years, and the cold and fatigue have overcome his strength; he bade me not disturb your Majesty by

noticing his departure, and he has taken the road home."

She trembled as she spoke, and the sight of her embarrassment checked the rising anger of the young King, for his wrath was easily appeased by a glance from a female eye. He merely contented himself by saying that he condemned La Vallée for returning alone, and forgave the apparent neglect of which he had been guilty.

"What! is he gone alone!" said the same old lady who had spoken before, and who seemed as much given to croaking as the raven in the tree: "Nay, now I should not wonder if he fell in with strange company ere he came to his journey's end; it is, in truth, passing strange he should have gone alone."

"And without apologising to his Majesty! I fear me he is ill indeed," said the Countess de la Vallée, yawning, and again resuming a dispute with an old Seigneur of the Court, concerning the pedigree of the Hautvents of

Mont-tonnerre, from which she had broken off to make the observation.

"Ah! he might meet with all the ghosts of all the d'Espignacs," said the young de Liancourt, in a mock solemn tone; "who knows but they might arise *en masse*, a complete regiment of bare-bones, to drive him off their land?"

"But there would need but one," said de Montbel, willing to aid these returning symptoms of badinage; "the land would now be claimed by none save Adhémar, and he may not as yet be quite a ghost, in spite of Finelli's prophecy."

"Oh, then our friend's luck might even be worse," said de Liancourt, laughing heartily; "if he were to meet Adhémar himself,—Adhémar in the flesh—he would have yet more cause for alarm, for outlaws are so rude and boisterous they little care whom they kill with affright; and Adhémar too has practised three most worthy professions, any of which would

kill poor La Vallée to think of: soldier, Ligueur, and forester. Ha! ha! only fancy the Count's amazement when such a wild huntsman should start forth from among the bushes! it would scare him so that he would repeat the whole of the code in order to quiet him."

There was a momentary silence in the assembly, for more than one had just then fancied that the boughs were agitated, as if some one were moving behind the tree; yet, on looking round, La Vallée's place was alone vacant. But the giddy de Liancourt did not perceive it, for he continued,

"Now would I wager my father's signet-ring against a marble pellet, that the Count meets with some wild adventure ere he reach the chateau. They always happen to persons of his serious nature who know not their value, while we would sometimes give all we possess but for a moment of the marvellous."

"*Pasques Dieu!* de Liancourt, I take thy wager," said Henry, endeavouring once more

to give the conversation a gayer turn; "here is my stake," he added, taking from his finger the emerald we have before noticed.

"Here is mine. Mademoiselle de la Vallée is queen of the day; she will hold them," said de Liancourt, throwing his ring into Estelle's lap. The King of Navarre did the same, and with the mere curiosity of idleness, she raised the emerald to the light, and examined it minutely. It was a gem of the largest size and greatest value, and bore the impress of a bounding stag, so exquisitely cut, as to induce her to regard it with the utmost attention. Her exclamation at its singular beauty was, however, lost amid the burst of laughter with which de Liancourt hailed the solemn announcement of an elderly gentleman of the company, who said with a frightened look, that he feared the King had laid an incautious bet, as it had been rumoured more than once that Count Adhémar had taken refuge in the forest, even where they now were.

The ladies drew closer to each other for mutual protection, and looked as if not knowing whether to be frightened or not; but the King, with more irritation than the occasion apparently warranted, endeavoured to allay the alarm this observation might have created.

"Pooh, pooh! my Lord," said he, turning sharply to the speaker, "this is mere idle gossip: young d'Espignac has doubtless sought safety in some foreign land, where his sword cannot fail to carve out a more splendid fortune than even that which he has lost in this."

"Ay," said de Montbel quickly, "or perchance he has fled to Lorraine, where all who loved de Guise will find a hearty welcome. But come, let us forget the subject: Adhémar is, doubtless, far away, and be sure La Vallée will reach the chateau in safety; there be none in the forest would seek to do him harm."

Scarcely had the Duke uttered these words, when the assembly started in amazement, the

King was on his feet in an instant, and his hand upon the hilt of his sword; for the report of a gun awoke the silent echoes of the wood, and then, a wild cry of despair and agony rent the air and chilled their souls by its thrilling tone. The raven flapped his heavy wings, and flew, screaming, towards the spot whence the sound had issued. His sudden rush from among the branches caused the company to turn in dismay to watch his flight. Estelle alone stood by de Bourbon's side, silent and motionless, as if suddenly turned to marble: her lips were far apart, and yet she seemed to breathe with difficulty; and her eye was fixed with a vacant gaze up the boundless avenue, for there, at a few paces distant from the party, all silent and motionless as herself, stood—the hunter, Julian l'Evêque!

The King alone was looking in the same direction, and, scarcely conscious of the action, the maiden seized his arm and held it,

as though she feared he would move to alarm the rest. She stamped her fairy feet in agitation, as she perceived that the hunter made no motion to depart, and seemed unconscious of his danger.

Henry was startled; he endeavoured gently to disengage his hand, but she held it in a yet stronger grasp lest he should escape. She grew bewildered and impatient: he, too, stamped slightly, and muttered between his teeth; and, with the hand that was still free, raised his sword, and pointed towards the wood. The effect was instantaneous; the hunter moved from the path; he turned but to take another look, and, striking his forehead with his clenched fist, sprang towards the thicket, and, in another instant, was lost to sight.

Estelle remained gazing upon the spot where he had stood, as if in doubt that he were really gone: she could scarce believe that it was Julian himself who had stood before her;

it was like a vision, and she, alas! had been visited by many such of late.

So sudden had been his appearance, so transient his stay, that the thought of his danger at first alone occupied her mind; but when this had passed away, and recollection returned, all the circumstances which had preceded his abrupt intrusion occurred to her memory. The report of the rifle, the shriek of agony which followed, caused a sudden pang to thrill to her inmost soul. She trembled violently, as, still clinging to the arm of the King of Navarre, she gazed upwards in his face with a wild expression of dismay and terror almost appalling.

Henry was somewhat alarmed: he mistook the cause of her emotion, and bending low, whispered hurriedly in her ear,

"Be not alarmed, Mademoiselle de la Vallée, I beseech you. Yonder Ligueur is a—that is to say—he is doubtless a fugitive: he will not seek to harm us—he—"

"Ah, no, your Majesty; think not that I fear him: no, no, I fear him not; but, alas! my father's peril! I saw him take the very path by which the Ligueur came; and—and your Majesty, heard you not that cry of anguish? Ah! think you his grey head is safe?"

"Fear not, dearest! he is safe, and at thy side!" was uttered in the deep, tremulous tones of the Count de la Vallée. She turned—it was indeed her father who stood beside her: his brow was pale and haggard; and his whole frame was shaking, evidently under the influence of some violent excitement. But Estelle saw not his agitation; she but knew that she beheld him once more safe and unharmed; she looked earnestly in his face, as if to assure herself that she was not deceived; and then, with a loud sob, she fell upon his neck and burst into a flood of tears.

The whole assembly crowded round, in mingled curiosity and fear, expecting to hear the recital of some marvellous adventure; but

the Count, to save time, and hide his own emotion, seemed occupied in endeavours to soothe that of his daughter. In vain were all the efforts made by the company to extort a single explanation of his return, and of the divers mysterious circumstances connected with it; all their inquiries were answered by frivolous excuses, or by the most urgent solicitations to return immediately to the palace. It needed not much persuasion to induce them to comply with this request; and, strange as it may appear, the moment in which they prepared to retrace their steps to Chantilly, was the happiest since their departure thence in the morning. All was silence and restraint, each appearing engrossed by the one object—that of reaching home as quickly as possible.

Estelle was yet weeping when she entered her litter. So rapid and varied were the thoughts which floated through her mind, that it were difficult to tell whether grief or joy caused her tears. With intense anxiety she

watched her father's countenance, as silent and gloomy he walked by her side; but so well had he learnt the art of concealing his feelings, that even now the same impatience to catch the first glimpse of the palace, in which all participated, was apparently the only sentiment by which he was possessed, and gave no colouring whatever to the story that the babbling Countess of Noverre had already coined in her fertile brain, and which she was just in the act of repeating in a loud voice to the deaf old Count her husband, concerning the apparition that M. de la Vallée had seen in the wood, which had alarmed him so much as wellnigh to deprive him of his senses.

Far different was it with the King of Navarre. His brow was contracted, his cheek was red, and more than indignation would sometimes shoot from his blue eye as his glance fell on the Count. He had pressed forward close to Estelle, and she could not divest herself of the idea that he was seeking an opportunity of

speaking to her unobserved. Nor was she deceived; for, on arriving at the gate of her father's park, he pressed hurriedly forward and took her hand, with no other apparent design than that of assisting her to alight from her litter; and while the ladies were envying this mark of attention, or laughing at the unusual cloud upon de Montbel's brow, he whispered in that eager, gasping tone, which betrayed his anxiety, and pressing her snowy hand with fervour as he spoke,—

"I pray you, Mademoiselle—I beseech you speak to none concerning the Ligueur!—You are young and tender-hearted; he—he is wronged—nay, he is persecuted, and has sought a transient refuge in the wood."

"Nay, but your Majesty—"

"Ah! refuse me not," said Henry, quickly; "I beg for mercy for the youth! the slightest word would be his death-warrant, and you would not surely—"

"Ah! no, no—think not thus: I was but

going to say, that I would sooner die than betray one who is—who is fleeing from before his enemies !"

The open countenance of the generous Henry de Navarre was suddenly illumined, as if by a ray of sunshine.

" Blessings be upon your head !" exclaimed he, with intense delight : " sweet, gentle, and innocent, and well worthy all the fond love of the noble-hearted de Montbel !"

He said no more, for La Vallée approached. He had spoken fervently and impressively, and, what for him was yet more remarkable, seriously. Estelle returned his blessing silently, but with equal fervour, for she felt that he was indeed a firm and steady friend to Julian l'Evêque. Her gentle heart throbbed with joy to think that one so good and powerful as the King of Navarre should be interested in his fate ; and, but for the words with which he had concluded his speech, she might have been betrayed again into one of the wild

dreams of future happiness in which she had once indulged. She would have given worlds but to have assured Julian, whose very soul had ever seemed to sicken at the mention of faith or truth, that here, at least, he had not put his trust in vain. And what comfort would not such assurance have been to Jacqueline? But, alas! her father had strictly forbidden all visits to the cottage since the arrival of the Court at Chantilly, and she had found no opportunity of beholding her, nor even of letting her know that it was the King of Navarre himself who had alarmed them from their calm security beneath the hawthorn.

But her reverie was soon put to flight by the approach of the Count himself. He came but to say farewell for a while, as it was his intention to proceed onward to Chantilly. The courtiers exchanged glances full of meaning as this determination became known, while Henry de Navarre grew deadly pale. It even diminished much of Estelle's quiet delight, and

caused her to feel somewhat uneasy respecting his motives. But La Vallée seemed not to notice the looks and gestures of those around; his demeanour was marked by indifference alone, yet, when he drew near and embraced Estelle, she remarked that he yet trembled violently, and that he pressed her to his bosom with far more energy than the prospect of so short a separation seemed to warrant.

## CHAPTER VI.

"You have fed upon my signories,
Dispark'd my parks, and felled my forest woods;
From my own windows torn my household coat,
Raz'd out my impress, leaving me no sign,—
Save men's opinions, and my living blood,—
To show the world I am a gentleman.
This, and much more, much more than twice all this,
Condemns you." SHAKSPEARE.

THE party now hastened onward to the Palace, the Count de la Vallée among the number, heedless of the doubts and surmises to which his sudden resolve had given rise, and far too deeply occupied with his own schemes to observe them.

Meanwhile it may be well to acquaint the readers with the circumstances which had led

to this determination, and which, in spite of this seeming calm, had not failed to fill La Vallée's proud heart with horror and dismay. He had, as we have seen, taken advantage of the breathless attention in which all had listened to the recital of the King of Navarre, and had stolen away with the intention of proceeding at once to Chantilly, little caring what effect this apparent want of courtesy might have upon the minds of his companions, so that he did but succeed in gaining first admittance to the King. It was this idea alone that occupied his mind as he turned down a dark and narrow path, removed from the main track, fearing that the King of Navarre, through excess of kindness, might send to fetch him back.

The path was close and gloomy. Above, the branches formed an arch, so low as sometimes to oblige him to bend beneath it, and in many places so thick as effectually to exclude the light of heaven; while beneath his feet the tangled furze and coppice-wood rendered it a

difficult task to obtain a passage. Gradually, too, the voices of those he had left behind faded in the distance, and the deep silence, unbroken except by the sound of his own footsteps over the crackling brushwood, soon began unconsciously to occasion other thoughts than those of ambitious pride to steal into his mind. Although he knew enough of the forest to be sure that he was pursuing the right direction, he knew not where the path immediately led, and the uncertainty made its gloomy length appear more tedious.

He had already traversed a considerable distance, advancing more and more into darkness, when suddenly, while treading lightly over a heap of withered leaves, which lay mouldering where they had been drifted by the autumnal winds, the sound of other footsteps, close behind him, caused him to start. He looked around; but no one was there! The dark, and seemingly impenetrable archway, was unbroken by the presence of any living thing;

and he again proceeded, fully satisfied that he had been deceived. He would have rejoiced at the approach of any one on whom he could have relied to guide him to the open track; for, by degrees, the self-confidence which had prompted him thus to take an unknown route, began somewhat to desert him; and he paused, in doubt whether it would not be wiser to turn back at once and rejoin his companions. But it was not, however, consistent with his character, thus to abandon his design, without being first assured that it was indeed utterly hopeless; and stepping upon the stump of a felled tree, which lay in his path, he looked around, fully resolved, could he but discern a termination to the long and narrow pathway, to pursue his project with renewed courage. It was with some little satisfaction, on being thus raised, that he now plainly perceived, at no great distance, an opening among the trees; and he doubted not that it was the entrance to

one of the many *carrefours* which intersect the forest, at equal distances, and lead directly to Chantilly.

He was just on the point of descending, when he was again attracted by the same noise, as of some one approaching, which had before startled him. He turned towards the direction whence it proceeded: he could now see above the bushes which skirted the path on either side, and, quick as thought, with an almost involuntary motion, he sprang to the earth, and stood there transfixed with terror; for, close by his side, almost at arm's length, stood the figure of a man, neither huntsman, nor woodsman, nor forester, nor belonging to any of those whose calling obliges them to frequent the innermost depths of the wood, but one whose broad felt hat and fluttering plume proclaimed him to belong to the hated, the dreaded Ligueurs!

The Count looked in wild dismay right and left, but no turning was visible. His

heart sank as he beheld the distance he had already traversed; it was vain to attempt returning: but after the first alarm had passed away, he deemed it possible that the Ligueur might not have beheld him; he had stood but for an instant in his elevated position, and during the short glimpse he caught of the stranger, he perceived that his head was bent, and that he was occupied in endeavours to soothe the anger of a large hound that stood by his side, and whose low short growl would, even now, occasionally rise, although checked by the caresses of his master.

La Vallée gathered his cloak around him, and resolved to advance cautiously forward towards the opening he had just espied. There was something so terrible in the idea of being pent up in that close, narrow pathway, with one who could not fail to be an enemy, apparently well armed too,—for the muzzle of his rifle yet bristled, immovably, above the bushes —and, doubtless, like the rest of his party,

ever prepared for combat, that the thought of emerging once more into light and air appeared like a new existence; and when, upon looking back, he perceived no signs of the Ligueur, he secretly applauded his own caution in having thus evaded him.

He was, however, doomed to disappointment. On quitting the path, he found himself in an open space, thickly surrounded with trees. On one side appeared part of the old boundary wall of the estate, now scarcely distinguishable from the green foliage which hung drooping over it, except where some fragment newly fallen caused the white hue of the broken stone to sparkle amid the dark ivy by which it was entirely overgrown.

There was a peculiarly silent and solitary aspect about the place, as if it had been parted from the rest of the wood for some especial purpose. And bold as was the heart of him who now sought its solitude, its beating was somewhat quickened, as it became fully evident that no

other means of approach had been provided than the path by which he had arrived. Yet, after a moment's reflection, it was perhaps rather regret at being baffled in his design of hurrying to the palace that caused his uneasiness, as he securely hoped that the Ligueur had been unconscious of his presence. It was but waiting for a short time to allow the unwelcome intruder to withdraw, and he doubted not that he should then be enabled to retrace his steps in safety. He advanced deeper into the dark recess and looked around; the mystery and seclusion which marked the spot led him to believe that it had formerly been consecrated to one of the many sainted hunters, or patrons of the woods, of whom no small number are to this day held in veneration.

There was a fountain jutting from the wall; the marble basin, which had formerly received its limpid waters, had long since fallen into decay, and lay mouldering on the ground, where it impeded the course of the straggling

current, which after forming divers small cascades, whose soft and ceaseless murmur broke the stillness of the spot without disturbing its repose, was lost amid the long grass that, nurtured by the shade and moisture, had sprung up rank and luxuriant.

A legend was rudely cut in the stone above the stag's head whence the water issued. The Count approached and read; a slight shudder ran through his frame as he recalled to mind the dark legend of the d'Espignacs; but the next moment his eye was raised in anger to the figure of a bounding stag, the well-known crest of this outlawed family, which still surmounted the wall; although he had imagined that all memorial of that race had long ago vanished from the forest. His first care on coming to the estate had been to seek for this very emblem, and he wondered not now that it had then eluded his vigilance. It was the last beacon of hope to the outcast Adhémar, the object upon which mysteriously hung the fortunes of

his house; so long as it existed, he would not cease to hope for restitution of his rights; and there was enough of superstition, even in the strong mind of the Count de la Vallée, to induce him to wish that it were destroyed. It stood where it had been placed ages before by one of the mighty heroes who had borne the name, and whose history formed one of the most touching annals of his house, and was as follows:—

Count Hubert was as brave a soldier as ever wielded falchion, or rode to battle at the trumpet-call. In war he gladly sped to the field at the head of a noble band of vassals, but in peace his free-born spirit scorned to crouch and fawn at the feet of royalty; he hurried back to his native Avilly, with fresh love for its sweet repose, and panting with eagerness for its noble and spirit-stirring pastimes.

Throughout the forest he was renowned as the boldest hunter that ever trod its mazy

paths; the fatigue and excitement of the chase were congenial to his ardent soul; and from the first break of dawn to fall of day, did the sound of the clanging horn re-echo through the woods, and tell of the boundless and varied course of their dauntless Lord, who swept through his broad lands with never-wearying ardour, nor once thought of fatigue so long as daylight lasted. They called him Hubert of the Forest, for his wide domains spread east and west over measureless tracts of forest-land, and countless were the feuds and fiefs that owned him for their master.

Years flew unheeded by in the pursuit of this loved amusement: already had the finger of age visibly laid its icy touch upon his head; the ebon locks were fast changing to snowy whiteness, the blood ran in a colder current through his veins, but his heart, still free as his own woodland breezes, not even age had power to chill.

Count Hubert had an only son, towards

whom his whole soul turned with idolizing fondness. But the youth loved the pleasures and dissipations of the Court, and but seldom came to Avilly. Report spoke darkly of his deeds; strange rumours had even reached his home of the career of wild extravagance which he trod; but the fond father believed them not. So long as gold was in his coffers, he gave with open hand, nor heeded the rapid diminution of the wealth he had hoarded, but for the sake of this his only darling child.

A time arrived at length when the spendthrift's summons could no longer be met by the accustomed generosity. The young man's reproaches were harsh and unfeeling; and sooner than again incur them, the Count, with a bitter pang, sold a portion of his estate, and hoped to be freed from his importunities. But, alas! this was only the commencement of his woes! Acre after acre was sacrificed to satisfy the ceaseless cravings of the prodigal; the goodly manors dropped off one by one, and gradu-

ally his boundary was drawn nearer and nearer home.

The spirit of the bold hunter drooped and saddened; he could no longer range, uncontrolled and free, over lands which had descended to him from his fathers! Wide as was still his domain, he felt as though he could no longer breathe with freedom. He found no more pleasure in the chase, and it was evident to all that his heart was breaking.

But the last blow yet remained to be struck. The son,—the child for whom he had already sacrificed so much,—to whom, in spite of his unworthiness, his heart still clung with fond, forgiving love; the heir of his name, who he hoped might yet return to his bosom, to be the prop of his declining years,—met an unworthy death in a midnight brawl by the hand of one of his dissolute companions! The scuffle had taken place within the verge of the King's palace; the survivor fled to escape the death which was the award of such offence, and a

heavy fine was levied on that of the deceased combatant. To shield his memory from dishonour, the Count, in reckless despair, had again recourse to his land to raise the gold; and the fountain, which had originally marked the centre of his estate, where he could once stand and point from north to south, from east to west, and say, with feudal pride, "'Tis mine!" now stood at its utmost verge.

It was by this fountain that Count Hubert would sit whole days in solitary grief, and mourn the spoliation of his inheritance, and the untimely death of his worthless son. The panting steeds would fret in vain for the summons to the chase; the bugle that once had sounded it so cheerily now hung silent by its master's side.

The wall at length was built to divide the remnant of the land from that which was no longer his own, and the bounding stag, the crest of his family, was placed at equal distances around. With sunken eye and qui-

vering lip, the old Count watched the progress of the workmen, who were thus, as it were, fencing him around; he felt as though he could not live encircled thus within his narrowed border-line. It was like imprisonment to him who had once possessed the range of the whole forest; and the hunter's soul, which scorns the thought of death, will sometimes shrink with almost coward fear at the prospect of captivity.

That part of the wall which enclosed the fountain, was the last erected. The buyer of the land was harsh and avaricious, and measured even so close that only half the spring was left on Count Hubert's side. Thus its silvery waters no longer played in freedom; they, too, were shackled and constrained; the stag's head from whence they issued became fixed in the masonry, and they were taught to issue from the wall.

The day on which the boundary was finished, a deeper gloom came over the spirit of Count Hubert; it was more than grief—it was

despair. When the work was completed, those engaged in it withdrew; but Hubert followed not; he remained where he had stood, and saw them depart in sullen silence.

The day passed away and he came not home: all that night the faithful domestics looked and watched in vain. About midnight, the wild requiem of the d'Espignacs was heard by many to swell mournfully on the breeze that was wafted from the forest, as though breathed from Count Hubert's horn; but still he came not, and it was deemed fancy. On the morrow a search was made, and there, on the greensward, by the side of the fountain, he was laid, stiff and cold. That night, amid the darkness and the silence, his soul had passed away in anguish, and no one was near to comfort him.

The spirit of prophecy had descended at the hour of death, for his hunting-knife was grasped firmly in his clenched hand, and with the point he had traced on the wall, beneath the

bounding stag, the words which, from that hour, had been regarded as the spell of the proud and mighty d'Espignacs.

" Though vanquished in battle, though chained by the foe,
Through danger and sorrow, through peril and woe,
So long as I dwell 'neath this greenwood bower,
May the d'Espignacs still hope for glory and power.
A d'Espignac raised me on this forest-wall ;
Should the hand of a d'Espignac doom me to fall,
Then he who destroys me, ere long shall the same
Die, unwept and unhonoured, the last of his name—

Not upon the battle-field,
Or in honourable strife ;
But his dauntless soul shall yield
To the coward murderer's knife."

Such was the curse, deep and bitter, that was breathed from the fleeting spirit of Count Hubert, and which was to cling for ever to all who bore his name.

His brother's son succeeded to the estate ; he was good and prudent, and by self-denial and thrifty management, succeeded in winning back a great portion of the family inheritance. And his son, too, and his son's son ; ay, they

all strove, and strove, and knew no rest, till the land was again their own, and again were the d'Espignacs mighty and free, and once more sovereigns of the forest; for their bright-green banner floated on each tower and fort which were set to guard its outskirts, and even amid its inmost solitudes none were found who wore not still the merry green. They destroyed the wall that Count Hubert had set up with shout and glee, and great was the rejoicing; but they *dared* not take down the bounding stag, nor yet the prophecy which he had traced beneath; for they believed in it, and knew that it was true; and that when it fell, the d'Espignacs should be no more. Perhaps it had been framed in mere bitterness of spirit, or to spare to other doating fathers the pangs by which his own heart was thus broken; and well had it hitherto succeeded. It had rendered the d'Espignacs a wild and solitary race, and proud and haughty. They knew but little else beside their own forest; they left it only to fight their country's battles.

In time of peace they were seldom seen at Court; the Lord of Avilly was ever found within his own castle, and the heir of his name beside him, for they quitted not their home, but stayed to guard the spell upon which hung, as they believed, their future destinies.

La Vallée stepped proudly back that he might view with feelings of malicious satisfaction the emblem of that once glorious race. A smile passed over his countenance, as he reflected that it was the last which could be seen; that all, save this, had long been banished from the land; and even this was now decayed and tottering.

It stood in bold relief from the wall; the fore legs were raised, and the whole weight of the figure rested on the hind feet. It would have seemed as though the first breeze of autumn would have dislodged it from its lofty pinnacle; and yet, as if to nourish the superstitions of the foresters, thus had it stood, braving wind and tempest for ages.

There were few who could have passed the

spot without a sigh for the fate of him whose spirit yet seemed to linger there; but it was not thus with the Count de la Vallée. No thought of the bold and mighty hunter, feeling captive even amid this wilderness, nor of the fond and doating father going childless and broken-hearted to the grave, occupied his mind; it was pride, and pride alone—the cold, selfish pride of gratified ambition, which caused the sneer to curl his lip when he reflected how soon he could dispel the hopes of those who still attached importance to the legend, and who had so carefully concealed this last remembrance of their once-loved masters from the hawk eyes of his myrmidons, when he first took possession of the estate.

"Yes," he said, in a low murmuring tone, "they have thought to baffle me; but they are sore mistaken. To-morrow's sun shines not on yonder accursed emblem! Heaven be praised, which has led me this way to find it! Would that I had the same good fortune with

Count Adhémar, who has so long defied our utmost endeavour to discover him. His fate, methinks, would somewhat resemble that of the bounding stag."

He paused, for even as he spoke, a fragment of the mouldering stone gave way and fell with a heavy splash into the water below, and the crest of the d'Espignacs stood tottering over the yawning rent, as though each gust of wind which had power to wave the boughs above, would cast it headlong to the earth.

A low smothered laugh burst from the lips of the Count, and a gleam of exultation shot from his eye as it wandered over the scattered fragments around.

"Ha!" said he, "the doom is nigh at hand, and I shall but help to hasten it. To-morrow this shall be displaced; we will trample it beneath our feet. The foolish peasants will imagine it has fallen from decay, and they will cease to hope, for the charm will then be broken."

"You *dare* not, Count de la Vallée!" exclaimed a voice beside him, whose thundering tones re-echoed through the silent woods, as they burst from the speaker's bosom with all the vehemence of ungoverned passion.

La Vallée trembled; a deadly paleness overspread his countenance, when, upon turning, he beheld the Ligueur, whom he had thought to have escaped so well, standing before him. He felt that he was lost! Alone in that deep solitude, he had but little chance in a struggle with one who, a single glance sufficed to show, was in the flower of youth and strength, and whose features bore the fearful impress of desperate and deadly wrath. He could not persuade himself that he was unknown, for the tone in which his name had been pronounced yet rang in his ears, and warned him not to hope for mercy.

The garb of the Ligueur was of the brightest green, faded and threadbare, showing traces of many a toilsome struggle through thorn and

briar, and afforded a mournful contrast to the crimson velvet suit and rich embroidered cloak of the Count; yet was the glance of the young man proud and haughty, nay, almost supercilious, as he drew himself up to the full extent of his towering height, and surveyed him from top to toe in undisguised contempt. The Count de la Vallée quailed beneath that fiery glance, and he gasped for breath, when the Ligueur, who had hitherto stood motionless, suddenly advanced, and, deliberately laying his hand upon his shoulder, looked him in the face.

"You dare not!" he again exclaimed, pointing to the crest upon the wall, while his voice quivered from excess of passion; "you dare not touch what Hubert, Count Hubert of the Forest, placed there with his own hand!"

He paused; a scarlet flush mantled in his cheek, and his eye kindled. "I tell thee, Count de la Vallée, it is the crest of the

d'Espignacs ! It has floated over their heads in battle when none were so triumphant !— it is the last sign left to tell the stranger that this was once their land, and—" his voice sank to a lower key, and his teeth ground as he spoke, " and, by the God of Heaven, it shall not be removed !"

The Count was somewhat startled at the tone of authority assumed by the Ligueur, but he endeavoured to appear calm ; he thought it might be some retainer of the old family, who had returned with all his prejudices yet fresh in his mind.

" Perhaps you know not, Sir Stranger," said he, with that courtier-like suavity of manner which he could so well assume, " how it has fared with the d'Espignacs ; Count Adhémar alone remains, and he—"

" Ay, it is well said, La Vallée," interrupted the youth; " Count Adhémar does yet remain ; " and, mark you, so long as he has breath, shall his father's crest remain upon that wall."

He again pointed to the bounding stag, and La Vallée trembled to see that he had grasped the rifle, which had hitherto been slung at his back. He was perplexed and annoyed at this recurrence on the part of the Ligueur to a subject which seemed thus to exasperate him.

"But know you not," he said, "that the d'Espignacs have forfeited all claim to these domains? And is it natural, that those who dwell here as masters, should love to see the badge of another race within their boundary?"

The youth did not answer; his eyes were directed towards the wall, and his lips were moving slightly, as though engaged in repeating the legend. Encouraged by this silence, the Count proceeded in a placid tone, but little accordant with his feelings.

"Now list you, fair Sir; this land belongeth now to the Count de la Vallée; it is the marriage-portion of his daughter; and—" The Ligueur started, and looked intently at the speaker; and the Count, well pleased at having

for a moment diverted his attention, continued with yet more confidence, in the same smooth, deliberate strain. "See you, it was given to the Count in recompense of service rendered to King Henry; for you doubtless know what fate befell the old Count, the father of young Adhémar; he—"

He suddenly stopped; he dared proceed no farther, for a fiery and withering glance shot from the dark eye of the Ligueur as he fiercely exclaimed, "Name him not! By Heaven, name him not! lest I forget you stand thus alone and unprotected! Name him not, lest I remember he has died unavenged!"

"Nay, but—" said the Count in terror, at this sudden burst of passion, "I—I had nothing to do with his death. You know well who I am, for you have but just named me aright. Fortune has made me Lord of Avilly, and yet I seek not to harm those from whom it has been wrested. I am the Count de la Vallée, and —and —"

" And I," shouted the youth, with a look at the Count which fell all blighting and deadly, and seemed to scorch his inmost soul; " and I, —nay, nay, turn not aside—look at me well, Count de la Vallée, for I—ha! ha! I am Count Adhémar d'Espignac!"

A wild sardonic laugh burst from his quivering lips as his eye fell on the faded hunter's garb in which he was attired; his head sank forward upon his hands, which were clasped on the muzzle of his rifle, and the long raven curls clustering in thick profusion down his neck, falling over his cheek, mingled with the snowy plumes of the Ligueur's hat, and concealed his features from observation; but the deep throes of agony and despair that convulsed his whole frame, but too plainly told of the conflict of emotions which rent his fiery soul asunder. His weary spirit sank under the filial anguish, the remembrance of wrongs unavenged, of keen, protracted disappointment, and for a moment he stood thus in silence, re-

gardless who was nigh, and, but for the cold shiver which thrilled through every nerve, to all appearance motionless. And how felt the Count de la Vallée? Had a thunderbolt fallen at his feet, it would have caused him less terror than did this avowal from the lips of the stranger. He stood riveted to the spot in mute amazement; his usual presence of mind forsook him at this hour, for he might, unperceived, have stolen away. But he thought not of escape—one idea alone occupied his mind—that Count Adhémar, the Ligueur Chief, was in the forest, and that he himself stood unarmed and alone beside him. His heart throbbed almost to suffocation as the youth raised his head and again resumed the stern, proud look he had worn before. His face was of the hue of death, save where on either cheek, a hectic spot glowed through the clear, transparent, dark complexion, and betrayed how deeply he had suffered even in those few moments.

But the struggle was over; for when he

spoke, it was in that haughty tone which none can assume but those who have been bred to habits of command. He drew himself up once more and stood again proudly erect, while his full glowing eye seemed to expand as he gazed on his trembling listener.

"La Vallée," said he, "it is fitting we should know each other. You are the present owner of these lands; on you they were bestowed for service rendered to King Henry. Think you I wot not well the nature of this service? But no matter—it is not to that I would refer. Now, mark you, to me they have descended through a long line of noble and distinguished ancestors. You are the first stranger to that race who could thus stand upon the death-bed of Hubert the Hunter, and call himself owner of the forest where it lies. I am the last of those who have inherited his name! You are, in truth, acting wisely thus to seek my life, for while I live—"

"Nay, I pray you, think not thus, my

Lord," exclaimed La Vallée, eagerly interrupting him; "on my honour, they spoke false who told you so!"

"You are deceived—you are deceived!" returned the youth, with a steadfast penetrating look: "I hold the warning of my danger from one who has never spoken deceit, and from whose lips no falsehood can proceed; one who is all innocence, and unlike her——But why should I waste the precious moments?— it matters not who has stood my friend; it is one who knows you well, La Vallée, and who dreamt not to have betrayed your secret to Count Adhémar himself."

He paused for a moment, and appeared thoughtful: "I have longed for this interview, Sir Count," he continued, by degrees assuming a louder and more resolute tone, "but not to beg forbearance, or plead for mercy: No, by Heaven! I fear you not, though you have a host at command, and I am lone and friendless. But am I not here,—on my father's

land?" he stamped his foot, and La Vallée trembled at the dark glance which he cast around. "Ay, and so long as I remain here, so long may I laugh to scorn all endeavours to discover me. I warn you they but seek their own destruction who attempt to dog my path: Ha! ha! I verily believe the grim old woods know well that I am the descendant of Count Hubert; they would refuse to give me up;—they love too well to nurse me in their bosom, as one whose fathers viewed them with such pride, and dwelt amid them with such glory!"

His brow grew darker as he proceeded. "Now turn and mark; it is of the bounding stag, Count Hubert's border mark, I speak. It is not an hour ago, when you thought that none were nigh, I heard you say, in pride of power, that it should be removed; now, as I live, you stir not hence till you recant those words!"

La Vallée was so totally unused to the sound of such language from other lips than his own,

that perhaps it might hitherto have been surprise as much as fear which had kept him silent; but as the youth proceeded, so full of fierce bitterness were his tone and manner, that it almost froze his blood.

"Now hearken to my determination, La Vallée," said he: "you tell me the d'Espignacs have no claim here,—that their inheritance has been bestowed elsewhere, in recompense of service rendered to King Henry,—and doubtless the service was well worthy the recompense! For me, seeing that I have rendered no service to King Henry, there is nothing left but to guard this last ensign of my race against the sacrilegious hand of him who would dare to move it from the place where it has proudly stood for ages; and well will I perform my office! He dies, so help me Heaven! who seeks to displace it from yonder wall!"

"Nay, but Count Adhémar—"

"Hold!" exclaimed the young man, stretch-

ing forth his arm, as if fearing interruption, while the blood suddenly rushed in a torrent to his cheek, and his eye gleamed with fury,—"is it not enough that you stand here as master? Are you not lord of all? Ay, all—all—all!" he extended his arms with wild energy as he spoke. "Ha! the d'Espignacs disturb you not; can you not even stand upon their very graves and call them yours!—Ay, where crumble the bones of Hubert the hunter, and Valmont the warrior, and—and—perdition! the banner of your house waves over their tombs down in the forest Chapel! but never shall it float where stands our bounding stag, till I myself am cold and powerless as they! No, by all the saints in Heaven! our crest shall not come down. It is I who swear!"

"Nay, but I pray you listen, Count Adhémar," said La Vallée, endeavouring to arrest this torrent of passion, perceiving with terror that the self-imposed restraint which had at first marked his bearing was gradually giv-

ing way amid the excitement of revenge. But it was impossible. "I hearken not, I hearken not!" he exclaimed fiercely; "but rather give ear unto me, Count de la Vallée: see that you mistake me not! By all that is sacred! he shall not live who destroys our crest! It was Hubert of the Forest,—the loved one,—the darling of our race, who here invoked the curse upon the d'Espignac whose hand should overthrow it: and here, too, where he died, do I breathe it once more!—Ay, a deep and direful doom shall cleave to him by whose hand it falls, let his name be whatsoever it may! See that he be not your favoured minion, for I am the *last* of the d'Espignacs, and should know him from a thousand!"

His dark eye flashed with vengeance as he brandished aloft the weapon which he held, and advanced with a firm tread a few paces nearer to La Vallée, who shrank from his approach with fear and trembling. He dared not look around, but stared vacantly as the youth drew near and stood within arm's length.

Perhaps it was the sight of this dismay which checked the boiling anger of Count Adhémar; for suddenly the resentment depicted in his countenance gave way to an expression of scorn. He approached, and laid one hand calmly on La Vallée's arm, while with the other he pointed to the legend. It was evident he struggled hard to subdue the stormy passion by which he had been assailed, and yet La Vallée felt not his terror diminish, but recoiled from his very touch, as though he fancied even that had power to wound. When the young man spoke again, his voice was deep and hollow, and yet trembled with emotion, but such was the eagerness with which La Vallée listened, that not a sound was lost; he hung upon each word as if he had expected it to bear his doom.

"Read you the legend, Sir Count?" said he, abruptly.

"Yes—I—no—yes, my Lord," returned the Count, stammering, feeling a secret misgiving

that this sudden change from passion to calmness could portend no good.

"Believe you the prophecy?" said Count Adhémar, with the same extraordinary abruptness as before.

"Yes—no—that is to say—in truth I know not. Yes, verily, I do," again muttered La Vallée.

The youth was silent for a few moments.

"And I, too, believe it, Sir Count," said he at length. "Perchance misfortune has rendered me thus credulous and superstitious; I know not, but fervently and faithfully do I believe each line;—ay, every word has its import, for he who traced it was near the death-hour, and dreamed not of deceit. It is true—it is true! He doubtless wove our doom with his dying breath. It was wisely done of the aged hunter; it has made the d'Espignacs love to tarry within their own border, to watch with fond and feverish anxiety the sign which he himself set up; for it is not the thought of

death that could cause our hearts to throb with dread. Had this been all, I doubt me not but long ere this another, wild and reckless as Count Hubert's son, would have yielded up the land; but, oh God! to die thus the coward's death—the dog's death of the prophecy! Ha! the thought has power to darken the spirit even amidst joy and revelry."

He paused for a moment as if musing, and again resumed:—"But it shall not chance to one of our name, if I have power to avert it. So long as I dwell amid the woods, I fear not, for vengeance is long-armed and long-sighted, and he who essayed to scale the wall would never reach the summit." He touched his rifle with a look full of meaning at La Vallée, and again proceeded, while his countenance grew darker. "But a time may chance when again I may be called to fight the battles of the Ligue, and who shall stand when I am gone? It is against such chance I would provide; and ere you depart hence, Count de la

Vallée, you must swear to me that this last emblem of our house shall not be removed."

The Count was unprepared for this; he gazed at Count Adhémar as if he did not understand him; he ventured no reply, for although his courage was more that of the council-chamber than of the field, yet for the moment he lost sight of the peril in which he stood, amid the surprise and indignation inspired by the unusual tone in which he heard himself addressed. His hesitation seemed to exasperate the young man, for he exclaimed with more of haughtiness than perhaps was courteous,

"By Heaven! you stir not hence, La Vallée," till you have sworn by the God you worship not to displace—"

"You ask me what I cannot grant," interrupted La Vallée coldly; "it is useless, my Lord, to press me further."

"Nay, then, by all the Saints you depart not hence!" shouted the youth, again giving way to one of his wildest transports of passion.

" Think you to return scathless to my home—my father's castle which you falsely call your own? think you to return and plot the ruin of all that is left of our once glorious line—and laugh and riot in our spoils? No—no—may I perish here—here!" he struck his rifle with violence against the turf—" here, where perished Hubert of the Forest, if it so come to pass! No, you love what is mine, you cannot live unless you have it all—ay, even to this remnant of mouldering stone; nay then, you shall share even the sole spot of my own inheritance wherein I may set my foot in peace. You shall come with me, Count de la Vallée, and share for awhile my forest-home; haply it has not the splendour of the one—Ha! ha!—of the one you have received from—from—" his teeth ground audibly—" from King Henry! But—but—"

" You are mad, you are mad, you are surely mad, Count Adhémar," exclaimed La Vallée in terror, his momentary firmness entirely forsaking him as he gazed upon his enemy, whose

brow bore all the fierce wildness of the woods, and whose rough speech bespoke the savage, solitary life, which had of late been his.

"Then yield, and take the oath!" cried Adhémar in a voice of thunder, and shouldering his rifle as he spoke; "take but the oath, and you are free."

La Vallée might be said at that moment absolutely to *feel* the influence which had rendered the d'Espignacs of the Forest so redoubtable; in nervous agitation his trembling hand searched hurriedly for his dagger, but it was paralysed, when the deep-sunk, flashing eye of the youth rested upon him.

"Swear!" again cried Count Adhémar fiercely.

La Vallee gasped for breath; his heart beat thick and fast; he no longer knew where he stood; the thought that he was in the power of one who must by reason be his bitter foe was alone present to his mind. and he called for aid in faint and quivering tones. Lan-

guage cannot describe the glance of blighting scorn which Count Adhémar directed towards him.

" Peace, doating fool !" said he sternly, unable to disguise his utter contempt; " what fear ye ? Think ye I would take your life thus ?"

" Help, help!" cried La Vallée with a faint effort. " O Father of Mercies, there is no help nigh ; I am alone and in the power of—"

" Coward !" exclaimed Adhémar, " do I seek to murder you ? Had I sought your life, could I not have taken it down yonder amid the brambles ?—Have I not tracked your path even from Chantilly ? did I not hear you but now swear destruction to Count Adhémar, and did I even then take my revenge ? and yet a goodly bullet from my rifle might at once have settled all my wrongs :—Ha ! Sir Count, and see you it was well prepared for such bold service."

He raised the weapon proudly as he spoke, and drew the trigger with a steady hand. La Vallée started back in absolute dismay: he

could scarcely believe he was unhurt; the quick and vivid flash—the loud and echoing report—the thick smoke—almost bewildered him. And Adhémar! he, too, sickened and grew pale. A shock—a crash—was heard—a grating noise—and—O God! his random bullet had struck the bounding stag,—the mouldering stone gave way—the last ensign of the d'Espignacs tottered for a moment, and then—down it fell,—rattling from the wall, and crumbled into a thousand fragments at his feet!

He looked at the place where it had stood, as though he did not believe it;—he looked, and Count Hubert's prophecy alone met his gaze! His brain reeled: he thought of the bitter curse—the awful doom;—a heart-rending cry of anguish and despair burst from his lips, and the rifle dropped unheeded to the ground.

He stood silent and motionless,—the outcast—the outlaw—and now with that curse upon his head to aggravate his woe! Even the loud and scornful laugh with which the Count de la

Vallée fled up the narrow pathway failed to arouse him from his mute despair. He heard it not; he looked not even around to see if his enemy were still at his side; he stared vacantly at the spot where lay scattered all that remained of what but a few moments before he had prized so dearly. "I, then, am the doomed one!" he exclaimed in gasping agony; and, with a gush of anguish, he hid his face in his hands and sobbed aloud.

This fresh burthen of sorrow was more than his crushed and wounded spirit could bear. Though yet in the bloom of youth, he had gone through every species of misfortune; but hope had as yet been ever near to cheer him with brighter prospects of the future; and pride—the solitary pride of birth—that feeling of mystery which is ever most keenly felt amid woe and disappointment, had lent its false and shallow aid; but now it were folly to suffer hope again to return to his bosom; and the boast of a long and mighty race, what comfort

could that now bestow? Was he not the accursed one of that race? And when he was gone, his very name would sink into oblivion and be heard of no more!

Oh how joyfully would he now have hailed the prospect of one day sharing his father's fate—to perish on the scaffold, where so many of the great and good had gone before! How gladly would he now have laid down his burden here—on the spot where the soul of him who had wove the dreadful spell of fate, from which he shrank with such terror, had passed away in agony! Any doom appeared less terrible than the shrinking, trembling death which must be his!

The heavy sound of a tolling bell awoke him from his trance. He started, and listened: it came from the Monastery of Croix, deep in the forest; and, as it rose and fell on the moaning breeze, it seemed like the knell of all the faded glories of his house. He listened in solemn suspense until it ceased, and then moved from

the place where he had stood. He looked upwards at the broken wall: a raven was perched in the hollow rent; she croaked and flapped her wings, seeming to rejoice in his despair. He cast one shuddering glance at the broken fragments of the bounding stag, and, with all the swift eagerness of pursuit, rushed down the path which La Vallée had taken, yet with no intent save that of flying for ever from this accursed spot.

## CHAPTER VII.

"Nous ne pouvons changer l'ordre des destinées;
Elles font à leur gré le tissu de nos jours."

MADAME DE LA SUZE.

MEANWHILE, the Count hurried back to his companions, scarcely daring even to persuade himself that he had so well escaped the peril by which he had been threatened. A thousand resolves passed through his mind, as he walked with the rest of the party to Chantilly, and the determination to seek an interview with the King became at last final.

As he silently retraced all which had taken place in the last hour, the fact of his standing at that moment free and unharmed, did not ap-

pear to himself the least wonderful. He had beheld Count Adhémar, the outlaw! the d'Espignac of the forest! at whose very name he had often seen the brow of King Henry grow pale!

He doubted not but that all efforts to obtain tidings of him had proved fruitless, since they had failed to search through Avilly, amid his native woods, where all the time, secure in the boast of a perfect knowledge of every winding path and solitary recess, he had remained almost within sight of the Monarch's very dwelling, and laughed to scorn the vengeance of his pursuer. Had it been any other than the Count d'Espignac, it is probable that even La Vallée's stony heart would, for once, have relented, and he would have hesitated ere he betrayed him thus to certain death. Even as it was, when the terror of that interview had passed away, and he no longer felt his fiery glance, he recalled to mind the generous forbearance of the youth, who, with rifle in hand, had walked by his side through the solitary wood, and

scorned to take a mean and cowardly revenge. The bold manner in which he had stood forth and avowed himself to his most mortal enemy —the fearless energy of his speech—and, above all—for there are few on whom a noble carriage can fail to make impression—his martial form, and almost romantic beauty; his lofty brow, on which high and long descent was stamped in characters too strong to be mistaken, too indelible to leave a single doubt of his identity, caused the Count to feel a slight emotion of pity, at thus delivering him up to destruction. But such gentle thoughts did not long find place in his bosom; and almost unconsciously, as he remembered the deep veneration which Count Adhémar had manifested for the legend graven on the wall, and his implicit belief in the truth of the prophecy, a smile of self-gratulation curled his lip, to think how fortune had favoured him, even in this; and perhaps he himself now joined in the superstition, and began to deem it not quite impos-

sible, that, ere long, the curse might indeed be fulfilled.

Then followed the welcome suspense—"What reward shall I gain from the King for this timely information?" He knew not, he could not answer the question; but he was aware how much Henry stood in dread of the forester; and unchecked visions of greatness and splendour kept his mind in a kind of delicious reverie, until the verdant *pelouse* of Chantilly was beneath his feet.

He had taken especial care not to enter into conversation with any of his companions, fearful lest he might betray how far were his feelings from being composed even yet. He had witnessed the debate between Henry de Navarre and the Duke de Liancourt concerning the rings, and listened to the terms of the wager; and, moreover, when they appealed to him to decide their merry quarrel, without the slightest hesitation, he awarded the honours to De Bourbon; although con-

scious at the time that it could not be mere anxiety for the fate of the jewel which caused the latter to eye him with such scrutinizing sternness. He had long entertained a secret suspicion that the young King of Navarre cherished a secret predilection for Adhémar d'Espignac; and how did he now exult in the good fortune which had thus, as it were, thrown the young man into his power, ere yet the noble Henry was rendered capable, from his situation, of befriending him. Not a doubt entered his mind of the possibility of capturing Count Adhémar; he could have the forest searched in every direction; he could cause every outlet to be well guarded; and thus, he could not fail to be successful.

Such were his secret ruminations as he entered the paved court-yard of the palace, where a few solitary domestics were awaiting the return of the cavaliers. He appeared to have gained fresh importance as he strode towards the portal, against which one of the lacqueys was leaning with that listless abstrac-

tion and happy indifference which generally characterise the members of that respectable portion of the community. In a loud and authoritative tone of voice he demanded of the groom-porter to conduct him to the King's antechamber, there to await his Majesty's pleasure to grant him audience. He turned, as he spoke, and looked around, willing to catch the jealous looks of the courtiers. He could not fail to observe a frown upon the brow of Henry de Navarre, and he even thought that a glance full of meaning was exchanged between him and de Montbel; but he soothed himself with the sweet conviction that nothing but surprise or jealousy could have occasioned it.

As he passed through the long vista of apartments, his eye was fixed with an involuntary gaze upon the door of that occupied by the King. To his no small surprise, it was suddenly thrown open, and a stranger, whose appearance excited his curiosity, was ushered out, and advanced hurriedly through the rooms to the head of the stairs. It was evident,

although he bore not a single trace of high birth, that he was a personage of some importance, for the laggard grooms and pages, who were lounging about in all directions, started up on his approach, and stood whispering to each other when he had passed by. La Vallée too surveyed him with a jealous eye, thinking he had now discovered the cause of the King's absence from the fowling-party, and yet he strangely differed in every respect from the companions the monarch usually chose. He was a soldier, of a dark forbidding aspect, whose grizly weather-beaten countenance showed but too plainly that he was no stranger to storms and battles. He appeared to have just arrived from a journey, for he was attired in a dusty travelling-suit, and the spurs were yet upon his heels. This negligence afforded additional proof of the consequence in which he was held, in having been thus admitted to the King. La Vallée would have observed him further, but at that moment a page issued from the King's apartment, and withdrew his attention.

"Ho, there!" called he aloud to those in the antechamber, "when the cavaliers return from the wood, go instantly and summon hither the Count de la Vallée; the King seeketh private speech of him on matters of import, and would see him in haste, and alone!"

The Count coloured with eagerness and agitation: he hurried forward almost ere the page had delivered the message, and in another moment stood within the King's private closet.

It was a small dark apartment, hung round with tapestry, the ceiling richly decorated with massive ornaments of carved oak, and the floor covered with a dark-coloured carpet of Turkey manufacture, so thick and soft that the footsteps fell unheard as they advanced over it. It was here that the monarch usually spent his leisure hours, and various were the objects indicative of his tastes and habits scattered around, in a confusion which completely put to flight all ideas of study or devotion in

the mind of the visitor. On a small table near the door were strewn divers preparations for the toilette, and cosmetics for improving the complexion, of which the King used quantities almost incredible, all prepared by his own hand; and the mixing and arranging of these formed his greatest delight and amusement. In the recesses on each side the window stood two highly-polished ebony cases, which Catherine de Medicis his mother had brought from Italy, for containing books and holy relics; but for this they were totally useless to the present royal owner, who applied them to a far different purpose. On the lower shelf next the ground, were arranged small ornamented baskets, in each of which, on satin cushions, reposed in regal luxury a litter of spaniel puppies, which, together with their pampered mother, did not fail to salute with deafening noise any stranger who entered. The messes, medicines, and food of these little favourites completely filled the upper shelves, or only disputed ground with

the chains and collars of their predecessors, a few of whom, rescued from oblivion, stood on the top, seemingly ready as in life to fly out with inhospitable fury on the approach of intruders.

The upper compartments of the window were of painted glass, and cast a dismal light through the apartment, while the lower panes were darkened by the hawk-mews raised on the terrace, that the King might enjoy the daily satisfaction of seeing the birds fed before his eyes. On a table near the window stood an inkstand, with various implements for writing, but from the sorry condition in which they appeared, and the confusion prevailing around, it was evident they were but seldom used. Small was the space, however, allotted to such unimportant objects. His Majesty had been deeply engaged during the morning tending a sick puppy, which having washed in sweet water, and combed with a gilt comb, he had adorned with ribbons, and placed in a basket by his side;

mixing a scented paste for whitening the hands, preparing a wash for the skin, binding the broken leg of a wounded merlin, and finally seeking relief from such engrossing pursuits in the favourite recreation of disburthening a precious missal of its exquisite illuminations, in order to ornament the walls and enliven the chamber! It was at this table that Henry himself was seated, with his head resting on his hands, and apparently buried in thought. The noisy greeting of the spaniels as La Vallée entered caused him to start, and he turned towards the door an anxious unquiet look, bespeaking distrust and apprehension, which, however, quickly changed to one of pleasure as he heard the name and recognized the features of his visitor.

The King was at that time in the very flower of his age, and yet he appeared no longer young. The cares of royalty, the murder of the Guises, had planted many a deep and lasting furrow on his brow, which time would have

otherwise withheld for many years. His pallid cheek and sunken eye told of a mind but ill at ease. No art, no charm could restore the bloom and freshness which remorse for the past and fear for the future had long ago dispelled, never to return. And yet, with that sweet self-deception which all are so disposed to practise, he sought to banish reflection and beguile alarm in the pursuit of all kinds of frivolous amusements unworthy of his rank or station, and fancied he had succeeded in chasing care if for a moment he ceased to think.

His costume even now was foppish and *recherché*. Much time had evidently been spent in adjusting the drooping feathers of his jewelled toque, and no pains had been spared in properly disposing the plaits of his *fraise* and ruffles, or in arranging the folds of his broidered mantle. The snow-white slippers, with the sky-blue roses, the silken hose and braided doublet, seemed better fitted for the parade of the courtly saloon than the privacy of the closet. The

hand he extended to the Count was like that of a youthful beauty, rather than of one who had once wielded sword with the bravest. Every finger was adorned with a costly jewel, which flashed and sparkled in the light as he waved his hand in token of welcome, and, pointing to a chair, bade his visitor be seated.

It was some few minutes before either spoke ; the Count was silent from reserve, the King from embarrassment and dismay ; when suddenly heaving a deep sigh, the latter turned a look full of inquiry upon his visitor, and said in a low tone, almost a whisper, " La Vallée, saw you the man who passed hence but now ?" The Count answered in the affirmative, and bent forward, that no word might escape his ear.

" Did you note him well ?" said the King without raising his voice ; " would you know him again were he ever to cross your path ?"

" Methinks it were possible, Sire," returned the Count, curious to know to what this questioning would lead.

" Then shun him, La Vallée ; avoid him as

you would the pestilence!" said Henry shuddering, and casting an ominous glance towards the door, as if he expected him of whom he was speaking to re-enter; "go not within reach of his arm!" He leaned across the table and whispered close to the ear of the Count, "Know you, it is de Lognac's envoy? he whom we despatched to Lorraine to seek out young d'Espignac."

"Ha!" exclaimed La Vallée, his eyes glistening as he drew his chair closer: "heard he anything concerning him, your Majesty?"

"Ay! ay! he has traced the young man well; no blood-hound has truer scent! he has traced him—where think you? Ha! see that yonder door be fast!"

La Vallée rose and tried the bolt; he knew but too well the cause of the King's alarm, and yet he trembled as though it were still unknown.

"In truth, I can scarce believe it," continued Henry. "Where think you he has track-

ed Count Adhémar? Ha! heard you not footsteps upon the terrace?"

He flung open the casement and looked out, seemingly to discover if any listener lurked without, but in reality to inhale the cool refreshing breeze. He turned again, but did not resume his seat, and the Count respectfully rose and awaited his Majesty's pleasure to continue.

"I could not join the party to the wood, La Vallée," said the King after a short silence, "you know not all I have encountered. Yonder soldier has somewhat disturbed my peace: he has brought news that may well make us tremble, La Vallée; young d'Espignac is in the forest close at hand. Even at this very moment he may be within arrow's-flight of the palace." He paused, and drawing his breath through his teeth, said in an under tone, "Within arrow's-flight did I say? within gun's-shot, were better spoken. Have you not heard how none have ever escaped on whom he

has once turned the muzzle of his rifle? and —and—But perchance I am deceived—it cannot be; he were wild to seek a spot so full of danger. No! no! the ruffian had doubtless a mere desire to alarm us. Ho, there! who waits? The page shall after him with this bag of gold, it will bind him to our service. It were not prudent to make an enemy of one whose sword and dagger are ever ready thus to serve the highest bidder!"

He opened a drawer of the table with trembling hand, to seek the bag of gold. He was about to draw it forth, but La Vallée arrested his hand.

"Stay, Sire!" said he, in a tone that would have created dread in a less timid mind than that of the King; "be not in haste, I pray your Majesty; perhaps yonder messenger may have spoken truth; it is not *impossible* Count Adhémar seeketh refuge in the forest."

"Nay! nay! you cannot believe it, La Vallée!" exclaimed Henry, his brow growing yet

paler than before: "It is too near Chantilly; he would never seek safety thus, beneath the very walls of my palace!"

"It is thus I myself would have spoken yestere'en, your Majesty, yet this morn I cannot choose but believe my own eyes; and, as I live! it is not an hour ago since—nay, be not thus alarmed, your Majesty—since I myself beheld Count Adhémar!"

"Ha! what say you?" exclaimed the King, losing all self-possession, and, staggering a few paces backward against the wall, he gasped for breath,—"Said you that you saw him, La Vallée? Nay, but you know him not. Did de Montbel say it was he?"

"De Montbel saw him not, Sire; none beheld him but myself; and would to Heaven it were but a dream! In truth, I marvel much to stand thus, more than ever, at your Majesty's command, seeing that I have conversed with the forester face to face; nay, more, the dreaded weapon, in the use of which he is so skilful,

was levelled and fired close at my side! And yet —and yet,—perhaps it was mere good fortune, —I turned away unharmed."

Henry trembled like the aspen-leaf. "We must see de Montbel—we need his counsel sorely!" he exclaimed in the greatest agitation, and snatching a bottle of essence from a marble slab which stood near, he from time to time applied it to his nostrils. "Young de Montbel is quick-witted," he continued, "and has ever some plan to counteract the designs of our enemies; this is why we have made him so often our counsellor. In times like these there is need of one possessing wit and courage to be about our person, to guard from faithless friends as well as open foes!—Quélus, Saint Maigrin, Maugiron, all—all are gone! and for such service there breathes not another like my own de Montbel!"

He sighed deeply as he concluded, and a tear stood in his eye as the tender recollections of past friendships filled his mind. He looked

not towards the Count, or he would have perceived how dark and lowering was his countenance. The words of the King had entered like daggers into his soul, and revived more bitterly than ever all his latent jealousy of de Montbel. It was throwing away all chance of advancement and preferment thus to admit the favourite into the secret.

"Pardon me, your Majesty," said he eagerly, "methinks it were wise to have no listeners. The tale of my converse with the Count is of deep importance; de Montbel is well-meaning, but his presence would but mar—"

"Nay, nay, de Montbel is our friend, La Vallée," said Henry sharply, "and it is our pleasure that he be admitted; there cannot be a fitter adjunct to our counsels. Ho, there! Levasseur, summon the Grand Chamberlain de Montbel; bid him make all speed hither, and not even tarry to change his hunting-suit—we will for once excuse it, seeing that we are not over choice in visitors this morning."

His eye fell with an expression of reproach upon the comparatively neglected attire and dusty boots of the Count. The latter well knew that upon this point Henry was frivolously, nay, contemptibly sensitive: that reproving glance added to his annoyance, and he remained silent, brooding over the way in which he might best practise upon the fears and weakness of the King, and gain fresh ground upon his rival. Henry himself, eased of a burthen of trouble by the timely thought of sending for de Montbel, turned aside to bathe his forehead with aromatic essence, which stood nigh at hand for the purpose. The fact was, the King disliked the Count de la Vallée more perhaps than he was willing to own, even to himself. Although now fast verging towards the middle age, he was, in heart and mind, as much a boy as ever. His companions were all chosen from among the gay and thoughtless; he feared La Vallée's deep and long-sighted ambition, and it was but seldom he could be prevailed upon

to grant him private audience. Perhaps it was a consciousness of his own inferiority; but he had always a secret dread of being alone in his company—a presentiment that advantage would be taken of every word and look if de Montbel were not nigh; and this feeling made him look for aid to the quick vivacity of the Duke to counteract the cool steady craft which he so much dreaded.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

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